Ichiro Sakaki
Illustration Yuugen
Outbreak Company
THE POWER OF MOE
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TWO MAGNIFICENT HILLOCKS SPREAD BEFORE MY EYES. SOFT, PALE SKIN ROSE AND DESCENDED INTO GENTLE CURVES, AS IF CALLING OUT FOR ME TO TOUCH THEM AGAIN, AND INDEED–

Elvia Harneiman
She closed out the party by jumping, lunging, climbing the trees, and generally acting like a real ninja.
Clara Belberith
"Me, too?"
"You're Red Angelica, Clara-san." (—Hikaru)
Petralka an Eldant III
"Does it look good?"
"Yeah, terrific. Are you...?"
She was Angelica, the heroine of Angelica—The Burdened Princess.
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"What's this?"
"It's the costume Viktorika wears in Angelica—The Burdened Princess." (—Hikaru)
Kanou Shinichi

Prologue

It seems I had spent more time than I thought on the creation of my report. I looked out the window to find I could already see the crimson of twilight. Soon it would be full dark. It was the new moon today—a portable lamp would be necessary to get around outside. Although I enjoyed a modicum of night vision, absolute darkness would still make it all too easy to trip and fall, especially on a cloudy, starless night like this.

"About time to go, I'd say."

We had agreed to leave after the sun had completely set—but going at twilight would be better. Walking around at night inherently made you conspicuous. When we got back, it would be the middle of the night: fewer people awake, less chance that we would be spotted and questioned.

I slipped out of my military uniform and into civilian clothes, then grabbed a jacket hanging on the wall. This region was given to large swings in temperature, nights often turning cold without warning. What was more, the jacket would help hide me. It was long enough to keep my tail out of view, and if I pulled up the hood, it would cover my ears as well, to say nothing of my face. Nobody would know who or what I was.

"All right." I tapped the lamp gently to wake up the sprites inside. They began to produce a soft, white glow, when suddenly—

"Hm?"

I turned at the sound of knocking on the door. It wasn't loud, but it was rapid, no pause between one knock and the next. The note of panic was obvious; it was the sound of someone desperate to avoid being seen.

"Who's there?" I growled, moving toward the door. I kept my voice low, as if I were shoving the question at the person on the other side.

"It's Clara. Big sister...!"

"Clara?"

I narrowed my eyes. Not because I didn't remember her, of course. Clara was my military subordinate. Practically my right hand. She had such respect for me that we often shared meals and spent time talking together even when we weren't on duty.

And today, tonight, we planned to go to our meeting together.

The plan, though, had been for us to rendezvous only outside of town. So why had she come to my house? Clara was young, but she was an excellent soldier. She wouldn't have gone against our agreement without good reason. Which meant...

"What's going on?" Something must have happened. Something so significant it had driven Clara to come here instead of waiting for me outside the city.

The moment I cracked the door, Clara all but spilled through the gap, as though she couldn't even wait for me to open it all the way.

"The military police are on their way here!"

"The MPs?"

"Yes."

Clara rarely betrayed much emotion in her face or voice, but paying close attention to her ears and tail often gave away how she was feeling. The fur on the thin, graceful tail characteristic of weretigers was standing straight up, and her ears were twitching restlessly.

Urgency, fear. That's what it looked like to me.

"I don't know much about it. All I know is that when I was at the guardhouse to return my equipment, I heard one of the MPs talking about how they were going to arrest you..."

Clara glanced back through the still half-open door, back the way she must have come. The road was nearly empty; all I could see was quiet, Bahairamanian-style residential houses. At least for the moment, there was no sign of any oncoming officers.

But Clara wasn't the type to make such things up.

"No... Have we been discovered?"

I knew in my bones that I had done nothing in my duties to warrant arrest by the military police. Something outside of my duties, then?

It was true that at that moment, I was about to engage in something that could very well be taken as treason, depending on how you looked at it. I didn't feel as if I was betraying the Kingdom of Bahairam—in fact, I felt I was acting with its future in mind—but routinely sending and receiving letters and goods to someone in another country without telling my superiors could understandably invite suspicion.

Suspicion that Amatena Harneiman was a tool of cultural invasion.

"Big sister—we have to run." Clara took my arm. She must have imagined there was no way we could defend ourselves against such a charge, and I agreed. If the military police were going to all the effort of coming here, then they had no doubt already searched my house from top to bottom. And if so, then they would have found the letters from that man—the strange outworlder who seemed to have the royal love of the Eldant Empress—along with the "samples" he had sent me.

More than proof enough of my traitorous intentions toward this nation. I doubted there was time to dispose of everything.

"We have to go, quickly." Clara kept glancing back toward the street. She seemed to feel the MPs might come bursting onto the scene at any moment. If we saw them, it would be too late. Escape would be impossible. If they had determined to capture a beast person, they would compensate for the target's superb physical abilities by including beast people among the officers, along with magic users.

"I understand. Let's go." I left the house with Clara, then we set off running for the edge of town. "But..." As strange as it sounds under the circumstances, a wry smile crossed my face. "How convenient that the police should come today, at this very moment."

"Big sister—!" Clara blinked at me. How could I say such a thing at a moment of crisis like this?

"To have a guide who knows the geography so well, just when I'm trying to flee—how reassuring," I said.

"Ah..." She finally seemed to understand what I was implying.

Yes. Very convenient.

To escape the military police, our only choice would be to go where they had no authority.

To the Eldant Empire, for example.

We had been into their territory on several small expeditions in the past, but when one was planning to go to ground for a long time, it would be invaluable to have someone who knew the lay of the land. And today just happened to be the day when the "delivery person" from Eldant would be here.

I had my doubts about this delivery person as a co-conspirator—I questioned their personality and their physical abilities. But I was a beggar now, and couldn't be choosy.

“I say we make a push to get out of the city, then hide in the usual place until the sun goes down.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Clara nodded. Then she and I ran full tilt through the twilit town, toward our meeting with the delivery person.

Chapter One: Give a Shout when You Shoot

"Shinichi-sensei!"

When the voice called out to me, I reflexively turned.

The classroom looked like it always did. There was the lectern. The blackboard. The lockers. The cleaning implements. And there were the desks and chairs, about forty of them.

Each of them was filled with a student. Humans like me made up about half the number, but there were also pointy-eared pupils: elves and dwarves. There used to be a lot of fighting between students of different races, but recently such discriminatory disputes had dropped off. Then again, they had been replaced by arguments about which were the proper ships and what one should get moe over.

You may have gathered by now: this was another world. There were elves, dwarves, and even beast people here, not to mention dragons, which were as common as daisies. You could even use magic—it was a fantasy world straight out of To*kien.

One day, completely out of the blue, Japan stumbled on a "hole"—really a hyperspace wormhole—connecting the country to this other world, the Holy Eldant Empire. It was a completely different place from Earth: different resources, different culture, different people. Convinced that there was serious profit to be had from commerce with this new world, the Japanese government proceeded to open diplomatic relations with Eldant in utmost secrecy, trying everything they could to bring the two countries closer.

In the end, to everyone's surprise, the thing that got the best reaction from the residents of this other world was Japan's prized otaku culture—manga, anime, games, and so on. In a world roughly on the cultural level of Middle Ages Europe, the development of entertainment had lagged behind, and Japan's extensive assortment of otaku cultural goods was immensely exciting to the people here.

And so, Japan established the general entertainment company Amutech, an interdimensional first. And I, Kanou Shinichi, was appointed its general manager. (It's a long story.)

My mission, as you might have guessed, was to help spread and popularize otaku culture here in this new world. This school was built as part of that mission. The students were kids eager to learn about this cutting-edge new culture. Of course, as a minor myself, even though many of them were younger than me, maybe it was a little strange for me to be calling them "kids." But anyway.

When I heard my name, I stopped writing on the blackboard and turned around...

...and found that the bland, familiar scene of the classroom had suddenly morphed into something I didn't recognize.

Everyone was sitting at their desks, as usual. But I couldn't see their faces.

No, that's not quite right. My view of their faces was blocked by something they were all holding up. Not their entire faces, just the upper half, especially their eyes.

So what was this thing that each of them was holding?

"Whoa, wait, hold on a second—"

But there was no time to stop them.

Ka-click! It was a distinctly mechanical sound. No sooner had the first *click* finished than dozens more followed it from every direction. It was like a spreading wave, a light but sharp noise. It went on until it filled the classroom.

Ka-click. Ka-click. Ka-clickka-clickka-click.

"Ahh..." I smiled weakly and sighed.

The source of the sounds was the objects in the students' hands—the portable game machines they were holding up.

3TSes. We had initially brought them to the Holy Eldant Empire as prizes in a soccer tournament we held. They had actually gone to the lizardmen, who had taken second, but they didn't really "get" portable video games. Instead, they were able to sell the systems to the nobility at a pretty hefty sum, and so the systems came to be in the hands of my students.

Plenty of the kids had been carrying them around ever since, but just recently, the most popular thing about them hadn't been the games.

It was the photos.

The 3TS includes a camera function. Some games use it as a part of gameplay, but you could also just use it like a regular camera. And when the students discovered that, they immediately became fascinated by taking pictures.

“Hee hee!” A dwarf girl sitting in the front row of seats laughed, satisfied.

This was Romilda Guld. She was the daughter of the boss of Guld Workshop, a dwarven foundry that served the Imperial will in Eldant. She was in her late teens—a lot like me—but her characteristically small body and that giant smile (which looked good on her) conspired to make her as adorable as an elementary-schooler. To be fair, the somewhat loli look wasn’t unique to her; it was something she shared with all dwarves.

“Score one surprised Shinichi-sensei!” Romilda announced. The other students also lowered their 3TSes, looking at the screens. Each one probably showed my dumb look of surprise. Personally, I didn’t think that was a very interesting thing to take a picture of.

“Gosh, you guys are really into this...”

“Uh-huh!” Romilda nodded happily, her short, red twintails bobbing. Then she turned the 3TS on me again and pressed the button. “You just press a button and the screen records everything around you immediately—it’s amazing!” She smiled again as if she were proud of the fact.

Seeing her like that, I remembered my little sister Shizuki back when she had gotten her first cell phone, taking pictures of everyone and everything in sight. She seemed to enjoy the simple fact that she *could* take the photos, no matter what was in them. I understood how she and Romilda felt. I had gone through that phase myself.

Of course, I had quickly tired of taking quite so many pictures, but even then, when I saw something new or interesting, I would snap a photo just to help me remember. I still did. And if someone as accustomed to taking pictures as I was still went out of my way to do it, how much more the students in this world where the concept of photographs hadn’t even existed before? Where you normally needed magic to record images of scenery or people? Of course they were nuts for it. The camera was *like* magic, but you didn’t have to chant any spells or prepare yourself spiritually. You didn’t even have to practice. When it came to sheer convenience, magic had nothing on this.

The upshot was that the minute we were on break, the students would pull out their game systems and start photographing everything they could get their hands on.

In any event, the actual popularity of photographs was fine. The problem was that right now, I was trying to have class. I was just gathering myself to give the students a talking-to when Romilda exclaimed, “Look at this, Sensei!” and started showing me all the pictures she’d taken on her 3TS.

She just looked so happy, and so cute, and she was just so completely innocent, that I found it extremely hard to scold her. It was like a cat proudly showing you a rat it had caught.

Still, I knew I had to say *something*. “Uhhh... Listen, Romilda.”

“Ha ha ha ha!” An even prouder voice came our way—one with an unmistakable element of scorn. Romilda frowned and closed her 3TS before turning toward the back of the classroom. “Are you still taking pictures with that thing?” the new voice said. “Get with the times!”

Excuse me, but just how far behind “the times” are you*?* The snarky quip almost made it to my mouth, but I just managed to swallow it. The speaker wasn’t teasing me, but Romilda. I didn’t have anything to gain by getting involved.

“Oh, what, Loek?” Romilda pouted.

The speaker was a slim, tall elf: Loek Slayson.

Like Romilda, he was a student here. His dad was part of the Eldant administration, unusual for an elf. Loek himself was, if I may say so, sort of the spoiled-young-lordling type. With his long hair and fine features, he was actually pretty good-looking, but the barbs he aimed at Romilda could be surprisingly childish.

Like now, for instance.

He had his left hand on his hip, and his right hand behind his back, as if he was hiding something.

Well, not *as if*. He obviously *was* hiding something.

With a self-satisfied smile, he exclaimed, “Behold!” Then he pulled his hand from behind his back.

An excited murmur spread through the classroom.

The item he had produced was neither especially surprising nor especially unusual—to me. But it was a veritable anachronism in the Holy Eldant Empire.

A digital camera. Specifically, a digital single-lens reflex camera, or DSLR. Unlike a 3TS, this thing really said *machine*! Even students who didn't know much about it could tell that it was professional equipment.

"Is that... Wait... Loek, where did you get that?" Romilda asked, giving voice to the question of the entire student body.

"Satou-san sold it to me!" he said triumphantly.

"Satou-san?" I asked. "You mean, like, the JSDF Satou-san?"

"Uh-huh!"

Ahh. So that was it. I had to admit, even I was a little taken aback to see Loek with a DSLR. I hadn't brought anything like that to this school—or even to this world. Most of the digital devices that existed in the Eldant Empire were here because I had judged them necessary for our otaku-culture work, and asked the Japanese government to import them. I wasn't thrilled to see the students with digital equipment that hadn't come through me.

"So that was his camera," I mused.

Besides Amutech, there was one other way for things from Japan to get into this world—via the Japan Self-Defense Force. There was a garrison unit here in Eldant to protect Amutech by the orders of the Japanese government. They received regular shipments of personal supplies, separate from the things I used for business. The soldiers would often get Japanese food or magazines, or other things to fuel their hobbies.

Satou-san's hobby was photography; I knew he had had at least one digital camera brought in for his personal use. I knew he also took photos of the JSDF's activities in Eldant in an official capacity, for their records. That must have been what tipped Loek off that a DSLR was also a kind of camera.

Come to think of it, I wondered how the JSDF unit stationed here supported themselves from day-to-day. Even with the Japanese and Eldant government providing most of their basic needs, keep a garrison long enough and people will eventually want to go shopping. I assumed that would mean they needed some local currency.

Given that this other world was a matter of utmost secrecy, soldiers stationed at the Eldant garrison couldn't readily go back to Japan. They even took their paid time off here. That meant they *had* to have Eldant money, right? Maybe they were getting some support from the government here, but when that wasn't enough, they would have to scare up extra cash

on their own.

By selling some of their stuff to the locals, for example.

“Behold!” Loek exclaimed again, fiddling with the digital camera. He flipped it around and showed us—mostly meaning Romilda—the small LCD screen on the back. Naturally, it displayed a photo the camera had taken. It showed the same thing as Romilda’s shots, which was to say, nothing very interesting. But the more expensive equipment did give the photo a bit of extra color and verve, making it a cut above the one taken by the 3TS.

I guess that’s what more megapixels gets you...

“This thing...” Romilda had walked over to Loek and was looking at the screen, as was pretty much the entire class; everyone was wearing expressions of shock.

“Taking photos with a 3TS is old news,” Loek proclaimed. “The future belongs to digital cameras!” He laughed proudly. Romilda, for her part, looked sullen.

Sigh... Here we go again, I thought dejectedly.

Elves and dwarves were traditionally not very friendly with each other. To the elves, dwarves were “shortstacks” and “soil-sniffers,” while the dwarves thought the elves were “wispy softies” and “airheads.”

And Loek and Romilda? They fought even more than most elves and dwarves. They were basically the leaders of the elven and dwarven contingents in the classroom, respectively, and as the spokespeople for the other students they often clashed. It didn’t usually escalate to physical violence, and I didn’t think the antagonism between them really ran that deep, but they could always be counted on to find a flashpoint.

Still, for as often as they argued, they worked together just as frequently. So I was convinced it wasn’t actually a bad relationship—it might even have been one of those “the more you fight, the closer you are” things. After all, no one would go out of their way to talk so much to someone they really hated, right?

“Grrr...” Romilda reached out and pressed the switch on the digital camera. Dedicated cameras have a lot in common with the 3TS these days in terms of button placement and functions, so she probably just did it intuitively.

I was just looking at them with a wry smile when—

“Hrm?” Romilda suddenly stopped grumbling.

“What’s up?” I tried to squeeze close enough to get a peek at the camera myself. Then my voice escaped me of its own accord: “Ohhh! That’s...!”

The LCD screen displayed a woman’s chest—a close-up, at that. Two generous lumps only barely hidden beneath a tank top. They looked soft enough to make you want to bury your face in that sweet valley, all of it reflected in glorious high definition...!

Incredible. Truly a photographic masterpiece.

Without meaning to, I found myself staring fixedly at the screen.

“Listen, you...” Romilda didn’t seem very impressed by the picture. She pointed an accusing finger at the screen.

“Huh? Oh, uh—” It was only just dawning on Loek what the camera must be showing. He scrambled to turn the device back around and hid the screen with his hand. “It’s not— This is— Uh...!”

“You pervert! That’s Minori-sensei, and I know it!”

“W-Well, uh...” Loek was still struggling for words.

It didn’t really matter. This was pretty clearly Minori-san, our resident WAC and my bodyguard, and the possessor of boobs so stunning they couldn’t be mistaken for anyone else’s, even in a close-up like this.

The real problem was that this picture was obviously a sneak shot. I didn't know how he managed it with a bulky, conspicuous DSLR—maybe they used a long-range lens or something. Whatever the case, it was obvious this wasn't just some "Oops, I was playing with my camera and the shutter went off" picture.

"You perverted elf!"

"St-Stoppit, don't get violent—!" Romilda had her dukes up; Loek shook his head and held up his palms. "You should be ashamed of yourself! Taking a picture like this without permission!"

Uh, Romilda... You and the whole class just snapped a picture of me without asking.

Once again I suppressed the comeback. I got that taking pictures of men and of women were different problems. I promise I did.

"*You* sit down," Romilda said. "*I'm* going to erase that picture."

"Yipes!"

Recognizing that they were past the point where discussion would do any good, Loek yelped and ran away. Romilda chased him out of the classroom with a cry of "Hold it right there!"

Ahem. Uh, kids? We're still in the middle of class...

Just as I was having that thought, though, the bell rang.

Oh, for...

"I'll bet Minori-san would be awful peeved if she saw that..."

Not that I didn't understand the impulse to take that photo, but sneaking pictures of people was just not cool. I would have to make sure all the students, Loek included, understood that. Since the idea of photographs hadn't existed in Eldant until just the other day, there weren't any laws against secretly photographing anyone, or even necessarily a sense that it was a bad thing to do. I guess it would take someone from Japan to set them straight.

"Shinichi-san," someone said from the door of the classroom.

I looked over and saw a precious young girl dressed in a Gothic-loli outfit.

Well, let me be more precise. I saw someone who *looked* like a precious young girl. But I knew "she" was no lady. As convincing as she looked, that was actually a man. Specifically, it was Ayasaki Hikaru-san, my assistant at Amutech and a teacher at the school just like me.

"What's up?" I asked.

“I wanted to ask you something about teaching.” He came over to me, his long, black hair flowing and his steps as graceful as a movie star’s. Man, he was drop-dead gorgeous. His appearance was so meticulous that he didn’t have to strike a pose or anything—he looked like he had come straight out of a painting whether he was sitting down or standing around. The hem of his skirt bobbed each time he moved, revealing glimpses of white leg that were downright scandalous. It almost seemed outrageous to think that he had the same thing between his legs that I did.

I wondered what he wanted...

“I was thinking maybe we could use this for our next in-class material,” Hikaru-san said, and passed me some papers he was holding.

At that instant, I heard the classroom fill with the sound of shutters again. Everyone was taking pictures of Hikaru-san. They were so into taking photos that they were even happy to take pictures of me, a person with no distinguishing beauty or exotic costumes. Once someone as glamorous as Hikaru-san turned up, of course they would want to take his picture.

I glanced at the papers and nodded. “Yeah, I think that should be fine.”

Hikaru-san, though, frowned, not saying anything. The camera clicks filled the silence. The students’ gazes, like the camera lenses, remained steadfastly on Hikaru-san.

“Would you quit it already?!”

Bam! The lectern shook—because Hikaru-san had suddenly smacked it with an open palm.

I found myself shivering to hear him raise his voice. The students looked just as startled, all of them frozen, still holding up their 3TSes. Boy, he must have really shocked them. Hikaru-san was typically a pretty calm talker; he very rarely shouted. But now...

“It’s every day with you people! Give it a rest!” He wheeled on the students, then took a deep breath. “You shouldn’t take a ’layer’s picture without their permission!” He spoke so forcefully that if this had been a manga, there would have been a big *ba-duuum* sound effect above him.

“Are you really cosplaying, or just... in girl clothes?”

I hadn’t meant to contradict him. Luckily for Hikaru-san, he wasn’t intimidated; he fixed his glare on me instead and said, “Shinichi-san, I really don’t think that’s relevant right now.”

“Er, you’re right, sorry.”

Yikes. He was seriously mad.

Maybe the sight of me falling silent cooled him off a little, because Hikaru-san cleared his throat gently and turned back to the students. With his hands on his hips, he said, “I haven’t said anything before, because I figured you weren’t hurting anyone. But the picture-taking just gets worse and worse every day! I can’t take it anymore! I understand how much fun new toys can be, but have a little respect!”

Oof. Talk about laying down the law.

Realizing that his anger wasn’t directed at me, I was able to take a step back and look at the situation objectively. Hikaru-san’s good looks were imposing enough—having him shout at you would make anyone freeze.

“There’s an etiquette to taking photographs!” Hikaru-san snatched a piece of chalk and started writing on the blackboard: *Image-use Rights*.

...Er, ahem, Hikaru-san. I really don’t think they’ll be able to just jump right into the deep end like that.

Not only was the Holy Eldant Empire not a constitutional government, it was proudly a dictatorship; I didn’t think talk of individual rights was going to get very far. Heck, when I had arrived, they didn’t even seem to have had a concept of equality.

In spite of all of these considerations, I was far too chicken to bring those points up with Hikaru-san when he was this angry.

“Talk to a ’layer before you shoot! Above all, respect image-use rights and don’t take photos without—”

“*Imm-age use rights*?”

“What are those?”

“It means that pictures of a photographic subject who hasn’t given their consent are unauthorized, and—”

“*Un-author-izzed*?”

“*Photo-grafic subject*?”

Ahhh... Just as I had suspected.

All the students looked at Hikaru-san blankly. I could hear the anger draining from his voice as he saw how they were reacting. It was easy to stay angry if the other person talked back or ignored you, but when they didn’t even understand what you were angry about... well, it was like throwing a ball to someone who wasn’t ready to catch it. Even Hikaru-san could see how much work this was going to be.

“What I’m saying is...!”

He persisted in his attempt to explain photography etiquette. But by the time the bell rang for the start of class, the students didn't seem to understand any better than before, not even when Romilda came in dragging Loek by the collar.

After class, I jumped in a bird-drawn carriage and headed for the beating heart of this country—Eldant Castle. I had received an urgent summons from the empress. She had sent knights directly to the school; they asked for me by name and said, "Her Majesty is calling for you."

This was pretty unusual. I was in the habit of appearing at the castle before going to school in order to update the empress on the state of Amutech's affairs and educational initiatives, but it had been a while since I had gone to the castle after class. And she had sent knights personally to get me. Anything that wasn't pressing could have waited until the next morning. So what had happened? I rode along, feeling anxious...

Hikaru-san, sitting across from me, sighed. He was leaning his elbow against the window of the passenger compartment, watching the scenery go by with a long face. It actually looked perfect considering his Gothic loli outfit, but never mind that.

"Is, er, something wrong?"

I wasn't the one who asked the question. Instead, it came from the maid sitting beside me.

Well, to be fair, she wasn't in her maid uniform right now, but in traveling clothes.

Myusel Fourant: flaxen-haired, violet-eyed, the very picture of innocence and sweetness. She worked as a maid at our mansion, and was the first "other-worlder" I'd met when I got here. Because she spent so much time with us, she had picked up Japanese pretty quickly, and even helped teach at the school sometimes.

"Are you feeling poorly?" Myusel asked, leaning toward Hikaru-san. The movement made her twintails bob.

"No, not at all," Hikaru-san said, shaking his head. Then he went back to gazing mournfully out the window. When he realized Myusel and I were still looking at him, he straightened up and shifted in his seat. "I was just thinking about the students and their photographs."

“Oh, that.”

The comment, delivered with a sort of wry smile... once again didn’t come from me. It was Koganuma Minori-san, sitting next to Hikaru-san. Yes—the WAC with the great rack that you’ve already heard about in connection with Loek’s photograph.

She wore glasses and had her black hair tied up in a bun behind her head. She looked like she wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone send you flying. But in reality, she was one *onee-san* who could be really scary if you ticked her off... Er, I mean, who was very good to have on your side.

How nervy was she? Let me put it this way: she once round-house-kicked an actual dragon.

Incidentally, ever since she rescued him by doing that, Loek had thought she was the bee’s knees. (Note: dead slang.)

“They got a few shots of you, huh, Hikaru-kun?”

“Yeah...”

“I get that they enjoy it, but they’ve sort of been overdoing it juuust a little lately.” Minori-san shrugged.

Hikaru-san isn’t the only one they got a photo of, I thought, before forcing the words back down. Minori-san probably wouldn’t get upset to know Loek had taken a picture of her—but a close-up of her boobs? That would be a different story. Despite being the owner of an absolutely wicked pair of Mount Fujis, Minori-san herself wasn’t always happy about the body she had.

Er, anyway...

“You can’t just take pictures without permission,” Hikaru-san was saying. “A ’layer definitely has to give their okay. Even with non-’layers, it’s only polite to ask.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” Minori-san nodded in agreement. She had some cosplaying experience herself, so they were probably on the same page.

As for me, as much as I considered myself a well-rounded otaku, I had zero experience doing cosplay, and had never been to a photo session or anything. Of course I had seen lots of cosplayers at Comiket and wherever else, and I had put on a costume when we were doing the movie here in Eldant, but that was about it. So I didn’t know much about etiquette and customs when it came to the cosplay industry (if that was what you could call it).

Naturally, neither did Myusel...

“Is that so?” she asked, tilting her head inquisitively, just like a little bird might do. It was such a cute, innocent gesture that I immediately felt the moe-ness flaring within me... but, uh, never mind.

“There’s nothing wrong with taking a picture,” Hikaru-san said, sighing again. “I just... wish they’d ask, you know?”

“I would be very pleased to have Master take my picture,” Myusel offered.

“Shinichi-san,” Hikaru-san said, fixing me with a stare. “You haven’t been taking photos of Myusel just because you know she won’t say anything, have you?”

“N—No! No, I haven’t!”

Okay, so I had some pictures of her that I took back before she really knew what a photograph was. But I had never *sneaked* any pictures of her... I thought.

“Hmm...” As I felt myself threatening to hyperventilate, Hikaru-san only narrowed his eyes further.

Aargh! He doesn’t believe me?!

“Well, whatever. The point is, the kids have been going overboard lately.” Hikaru-san shrugged. “I don’t mind if they take my picture. But they have to learn to be polite about it.”

“I guess we should have taught them a little more about how photographs work before things got to this point,” Minori-san said, crossing her arms.

As I mentioned, cameras and photography were completely new here in Eldant. The main way to preserve an image of something around here was to paint a picture of it. There was also magic that would allow you to freeze a scene or picture of someone in a crystal ball, but crystal balls were expensive, and using magic meant taking the time and concentration to chant the incantation. It wasn’t very precise.

There was nothing quite like photography, where you just took out the camera and produced a picture. Much like in modern-day Japan, things had to be accessible if they were going to become a fad. And if a camera had one advantage over painting and magic, it was ease of use.

But that same accessibility meant it could spread widely—and I hadn’t understood the trouble this could cause. The rules people voluntarily submitted to in order to prevent arguments—in other words, manners—didn’t spread nearly as fast as the cameras.

“I guess you have to really think before you bring something like this in,” I said. I was partly talking to myself, but in the corner of my eye I could see Hikaru-san look away uncomfortably.

I was sure he still remembered. He couldn’t have forgotten the problems that had followed when he had tried to introduce card games and ero games here.

When you introduce a stimulus to people who aren’t used to it, such as a new form of entertainment, it’s all too easy for them to lose their self-control and become addicted. Some students had gone nuts on the card games, spending copious amounts of money in pursuit of strong cards. As for the ero game, we ended up with one guy who locked himself in the bathroom all day to play it.

So entertainment had the potential to be really dangerous. The people here didn’t have much knowledge or experience yet when it came to these things, so it was important for us, the suppliers, to be careful. We couldn’t predict everything that might happen, but we had to keep our eyes out for any potential problems and nip them in the bud, lest we wind up with another catastrophe on our hands.

“We can’t just try to pound etiquette into their heads, though,” Minori-san said. “It would never stick.”

I agreed. “What if we... hmm. Maybe we could do a photography class or something. And we could teach them about etiquette at the same time.”

“Just as a little aside, huh?” Hikaru-san smiled without much conviction. “You’re right, though, that might be the most practical thing.”

“Okay, Shinichi-kun, we’ll leave it to you to come up with the details.” Minori-san bowed to me with a hint of exaggerated politeness.

“Huh? You want me to do it?”

“Well, it was your idea.”

“Er... Well, yeah, but...”

“Ahem... Shinichi-sama, if there’s anything I can do to help, I’ll be happy to do it,” Myusel said. She was so thoughtful.

Okay, well, I could probably pull this off somehow. I could get Satou-san to teach me the basics of photography. And I could quiz Minori-san and Hikaru-san on exactly what etiquette I should teach. All I would have to do would be to come up with the overall outline of the course.

“We’ve arrived,” the coachman said, interrupting my thoughts. The carriage pulled up in front of Eldant Castle.

Meeting Her Majesty the Empress in Eldant Castle meant going to the audience chamber. That only made sense, both from the perspective of Her Majesty's safety and this country's social-class system, but interestingly, there were several different audience chambers in the castle, and which one was used depended on who was visiting and what the situation was.

There was a massive audience chamber for when there was a host of advisors in attendance, and a relatively smaller one for quieter conversations. Our morning meetings about Amutech usually took place in the latter.

This afternoon, we found ourselves once again ushered into the small audience chamber. Believe it or not, I was used to this by now: I bowed to the knights standing guard outside, then walked into the room without so much as a knot in my stomach.

At which point—

"Hrk?!"

—my eyes were suddenly assaulted by a powerful light. For a second, I was blinded.

"Wh-What...?" I groaned, squinting.

The overexposed world slowly went back to normal. I blinked several times and cast a look around the audience chamber. My eyes settled on an elegant throne set several steps above the ground, on which sat a beautiful young girl. The most striking things about her were her long, flawless silver hair and wide emerald eyes. She was very cute. She was holding some kind of black lump in both hands and grinning at me.

This was Petralka an Eldant III. Aka Her Majesty the Empress. Amazingly adorable and *chibi* size to boot. If you didn't know any better, you'd just want to give her a big hug. Of course, if you did that, heads would roll... literally.

I was told she was seventeen years old, but she could pass for four or five years younger than that, and she was pretty sensitive about it. If, on seeing her for the first time, someone were to exclaim "IS THAT ***REALLY*** AN ARCHETYPAL LITTLE GIRL?!" she would get very angry. To be fair, I guess any empress would be angry about a person shouting something like that, even if they didn't have some insecurities about their looks.

Geez, it’s... it’s a little late to be saying this, but I’m really lucky to have escaped with my life.

Anyway...

“Petralka...” It didn’t take me long to figure out what that black lump was that she was holding. A camera. Another expensive-looking DSLR, at that.

She had it clasped to her chest with a look of real joy, like a child with a new toy. The bright light that had surprised me so much must have been the flash from this camera.

“Wh-What’s going on? Where’d you get that?”

“We have heard of their popularity at school. We wished to try one for ourselves.” She added a proud little chuckle. Then she held up the camera again and pressed the shutter.

“Yipes—!” I shielded my eyes with my hand as the flash went off again. The school was bad enough—but I had never expected to get my picture taken in the royal audience chamber!

I glanced back at the others. Myusel was stiff, petrified at the thought of having her photo taken by the Empress herself. Minori-san wore a sort of helpless smile, probably thinking the same thing I was; but Hikaru-san, still bothered about manners, was in a huff.

Hmm. Maybe this wasn’t a great situation. Hikaru-san looked pretty darn mad—he wasn’t usually the type to show such open emotion in front of Her Majesty. For better or for worse, he had a sharp sense of what would be helpful and what wouldn’t, and he was usually very good at controlling himself.

In any event, I took it upon myself to stop Petralka’s relentless barrage of photographs.

“B-But Petralka, how did you get that camera?”

“Hrm?”

“I mean, I didn’t think you had anything like that.”

I knew she owned a 3TS, but I’d had no idea she’d gotten her hands on specialty equipment like a DSLR.

“Ah,” she said indifferently. “Zahar requested this from your Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff.”

“Huh? Zahar-san did?” I blinked my eyes at the unexpected camera owner.

Petralka glanced at the two people standing beside and slightly behind the throne, as if seeking confirmation. One of these people was a handsome knight with long, silver hair: the noble, Garius en Cordobal. The other was an elderly man with white hair and a white beard—Petralka’s tutor and regent, Prime Minister Zahar. Apparently, it was his camera she was using...

“Zahar-san, is that your camera?” I asked.

“Oh, goodness, well,” he said, nodding and smiling with evident embarrassment.

Prime ministers in fantasy stories are usually trying to control the throne from the shadows, or turn out to be the ultimate villains, but there

was no trace of any of that sort of nastiness from Zahar-san. In fact, he indulged Petralka's demands almost like a doting grandfather.

"I thought it might be useful for documenting Her Majesty's growth," he said. "I had to pull some strings, but I got one."

"Huh..."

So Zahar-san had leaned on Satou-san, too.

It sounded to me, though, like this was back before photography became such a big deal at school, and Zahar-san had only taken pictures of Petralka and her immediate surroundings; the camera had never gone outside the castle.

He really was like a surrogate parent to her. He probably adored her. I wouldn't have been surprised if he started cornering friends and family with a handmade Petralka photo album.

When it came to most of the things we brought over from Japan, though, Zahar-san—maybe because he was considerably older than our target audience—never went crazy for our imports. He kept a certain distance, observing with calm detachment. But I guess he wasn't completely immune to their influence.

Well, anyway. When Petralka heard about the photography craze at school, she had demanded to use Zahar-san's camera, grabbing it for herself and taking pictures of everything she could point it at.

Ahhh... crud. This is no good.

She was just like the students at school. Slightly frantic, I said, "Uh... Uh, Petralka? It's not nice to ambush someone when you take their picture."

"It isn't?" She put the camera on her knees, thunderstruck. Yes, this adorable empress was an absolute ruler who could and sometimes did make people bend to her every whim. Yet somehow, the power hadn't really gone to her head; she had a remarkably sincere side as well. At least, she was willing to listen when you spelled out a situation for her.

"We have this thing called image-use rights."

"*Ee-mage use rites*? Hrm. Is it some kind of finishing move?"

"No, that's *dark rites*." I said pointedly.

"So what happened in Akiba was also wrong?"

"Akiba?"

"You know. When we were in Akiba recently. Did all the Ja-panese not take our photo-graph? Was that not bad as well?"

"Well, uh..."

I didn't know quite what to say. Petralka was talking about a brief trip back to Japan that we'd taken recently. She hadn't been invited, but she'd stowed away in our luggage—and I figured that since she was there anyway, we might as well check out Akihabara together. Petralka, Myusel, and Elvia, though, ended up being treated as mysterious foreign actresses (it's a long story), and in Japan there's a widespread feeling that famous people are fair game for photographs. Call it the price of fame. Some actors and pro sports players even think of these pictures as free PR, so they don't go around quibbling about image use.

The result was, we ended up being the subject of a lot of pictures taken by passersby as we walked around Akiba. And yes, you could question the legality of what they were doing.

"Hmmm..."

I struggled with how to explain this to Petralka. I wasn't sure she would understand if I babbled about "the price of fame." I mean, the whole concept of image-use rights itself was somewhat strange to her and the others here. The whole reason it was even an issue in Japan was because of how easily and how readily people could take photos. Why should they worry about it at all in Eldant, where cameras hadn't even been a thing until just recently?

So I tried a different tack.

"L-Listen," I said, almost groaning out the words, "the truth is... if someone takes a careless photograph of you, it can steal your soul."

"What?!" Petralka's eyes were the size of dinner plates.

"So when you want to take someone's picture, you should be sure to ask for—"

"Ye gods! Has our soul been stolen?! And have we stolen *your* soul, Shinichi? Or is it about to be stolen?" Petralka was clearly shaken. And as adorable as it was to see her so frantic, this was no time to be savoring her innocence and naïveté. Prime Minister Zahar looked just as shocked as the empress. I'm sure he didn't expect this turn of the conversation any more than she did.

And then there was...

"Is that really true?" The anxious question came from Myusel, beside me. She was clearly terrified. Her picture had been taken dozens, maybe even hundreds, of times—just by me. That would be scary. "Am I going to lose my soul?"

“No, look—no, no. That was just a metaphor...”

“What...?” Myusel blinked at me. She looked thoughtful for a moment. Maybe she wasn’t sure what a metaphor was. “Does this mean *you* have my soul now, Master...?”

“No, I’m telling you, it was a figurative expression.”

“Well... That’s very comforting.” She smiled and glanced at the ground.

So... what? She didn’t mind losing her soul if she had given it to me? Did she think it had turned into a hard, little chip somewhere that she could get back by defeating the enemy Sta*d user? ...Come to think of it, how *did* they conceptualize the soul around here?

“Umm...”

What to do, what to do? This had all started with a misunderstanding, and it was only getting worse.

“Your Majesty.” I was saved by the intervention of someone who had been watching the conversation develop silently until that moment: Minori-san. “Shinichi-kun is only joking.”

“Hrm? Is he indeed?”

“Yes. On that note, Your Majesty, do you remember the magical-girl movie?”

“Er—?” Petralka was caught off guard by the sudden change of topic.

“The Holy Eldant Empire’s very first movie, in which Your Majesty was—”

“Gnnrrrr! Silence! Do not speak of it!” Petralka nearly convulsed on her throne.

The movie Minori-san was talking about was one we had produced to help cover up a leak by the JSDF, the first such film ever produced in Eldant. We had also deliberately released a making-of documentary on the net, which is what had led to Petralka and the others being treated like movie stars.

“That thing does not exist!” Petralka went on. “It is null! Void! Strike it from the history books!”

Er, Petralka. If you have to strike something out of history... that means it was *part of history.*

But I knew better than to offer a quip in the face of her consternation.

“It’s possible that a photograph will end up the same way,” Minori-san said calmly.

“Hrm...?”

“There will be an image of you that you may not approve of. Maybe even one you find deeply embarrassing. And because a photograph captures an instant in time, unlike a movie where there’s motion, you might even be making a strange face, say.”

“Hmm...”

“For example, Your Majesty, you blink sometimes, don’t you?”

“Well... yes, of course we do. But we fail to see the relevance—”

“It only lasts a fraction of a second, so we don’t think much about it, but a photograph can capture a fraction of a second.” Minori-san half-closed her eyes in demonstration. “And if you happen to be doing this when the picture is taken, then that’s what will be left to posterity. Even if you, the subject, didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Petralka and Zahar-san both looked at Minori-san with her exaggeratedly sleepy face, then looked at each other.

“Ahem... Your Majesty, if I may,” Zahar-san, said, reaching out for the camera and pressing some buttons. “I think your recent photo-graphs...”

“Hrrm...”

The two of them looked at each other and then at the camera’s LCD screen. I didn’t know what exactly it showed, but I could guess that Petralka had taken some of those “unauthorized photographs” Minori-san had warned her about.

“You see what I’m saying, Your Majesty?” Minori-san asked, smiling softly. “A person can be pretty embarrassed by an unexpected photograph.”

“Yes... Yes, we understand,” Petralka said meekly.

“Phew. Thanks, Minori-san,” I said with a sigh of relief.

It looked like I had better get that photography class, etiquette and all, up and running fast. Right now the photography craze was confined to the school, but when people found out that the empress herself was into the trend, nobles and merchants would trip over themselves to get cameras, if for no reason other than to get closer to Her Majesty.

Cameras, though, weren’t easy to come by here in the Holy Eldant Empire. That meant supply and demand would go out of whack, and like with the card game, they would be sold at outrageous prices, or stolen. We would have to secure a reasonably steady supply to help prevent that. But once we started supplying cameras, the skyrocketing population of photographers could easily make etiquette-related problems an epidemic. We would have to get out ahead of this.

“By the way, why *did* you call me here?” I suddenly remembered I was in that audience chamber by special summons. Had she requested my presence just to show off her new camera? It was one thing for a few of us to be oohing and ahhing over it in this little room. But if she brought out the camera and the photographs in front of her advisors and whoever else—well, that “outbreak” of demand for the devices could become reality in a hurry. “Did you just want to show us your camera?”

“No, even we are above that,” Petralka said, shaking her head.

As she spoke, Garius, who had been silent until that moment, took a step forward. “Let me answer that question.”

Whoa. Were things about to get serious in here?

Along with Prime Minister Zahar, Petralka’s cousin Garius helped her run the country. In particular, Garius tended to deal with military and security matters, so anything he wanted to talk about naturally tended to involve danger.

“It so happens that over the last several days, our skirmishes with Bahairam have become somewhat more intense.”

The Kingdom of Bahairam was a neighboring nation of the Eldant Empire. The two countries weren’t at war, exactly, but they weren’t on great terms, either. Border skirmishes and espionage were an almost daily occurrence, two hostile nations vying to keep each other in check.

“According to reports, most of the fights have been started by the Bahairam side... But they don’t seem quite serious.”

“What do you mean?”

“The fighting forces have been small-scale,” Garius said. “Far too few troops for an invasion. But I can’t help thinking the engagements seem more frequent than usual.”

So we had a small number of troops getting into battles more often than normal. Hmm. Strange stuff for sure. I was no tactician, though, and I couldn’t begin to guess what Bahairam might be thinking based on that information alone.

“In any event,” Garius said, “Shinichi, be careful.”

“Huh? Me?”

“You were kidnapped once. Have you forgotten?”

“Oh, uh... no.”

“The engagements may be small-scale, but if they happen to find a place where our defenses are weak, a group of Bahairam’s soldiers could

punch straight into our territory."

"I'll watch out," I said.

Garius was right: Bahairam had abducted me once in the past. On that occasion, Myusel, Minori-san, and a crew of others had come to rescue me. It had ultimately ended well, and we had even established friendly—which was to say cooperative—relations with some people on the Bahairam side, so I didn't actually consider it such a bad memory.

But then...

"Furthermore, as regards your werewolf..."

"Huh?! Elvia has nothing to do with it!" I exclaimed.

By "Elvia," I meant Elvia Harneiman, the artist-cum-wolf-girl who lived at our mansion. Bahairam had sent her to Eldant as a disposable spy. Actually, as far as Bahairam knew, she was still undercover here. If things with Bahairam were getting more precarious, it was no surprise that Eldant's leaders might look askance at Elvia.

But she was one of the ones who had come to rescue me when I had been kidnapped. For better or for worse, she was as open a person as you could hope to meet; I just couldn't picture her secretly planning our downfall or something.

"Don't panic, Shinichi," Petralka interjected. "Even we do not question that girl anymore." Petralka had come to visit us at the mansion more than once, giving her plenty of opportunity to interact with Elvia. She was well aware of Elvia's personality and current situation. "However, it is possible to conceive of a situation in which she would be *forced* to betray our country—for example, if her family back in Bahairam were to be taken hostage."

"We understand you may not like it, but keep one eye on her for the time being."

"Er..... Right."

One look at Petralka's face told me everything: she didn't want to doubt Elvia any more than I did. But objectively, Garius and Petralka's words held water. And they were bringing up the possibility mainly out of concern for my safety. I couldn't be angry at them for that.

"...I understand. I appreciate the warning."

The words came not from me—but from Minori-san, my bodyguard.

After our audience at the castle, we went straight back to the mansion. I thanked the driver and hopped out of the carriage. As soon we got in the house, Myusel started pulling off her going-out overclothes. Apparently she just didn't feel right if she was at the mansion but not in her maid uniform. She was always so diligent.

"I'll start preparing dinner, then," she said, pulling on her frilly headpiece.

"Thanks, Myusel," I said.

"Not at all, it's my j— Oh."

She had turned toward the kitchen, but saw something that stopped her in her tracks. Wondering what it could be, I joined her.

"Oh. Elvia."

The wolf girl was running toward us down the hallway. "Welcome hooome!" She ground to a halt in front of us, grinning. The fluffy ears that hung from her head flopped, and the fuzzy tail that grew from her behind wagged like a happy puppy. This was the girl we had been talking about at the castle: the former Bahairamanian spy, now our resident artist, Elvia Harneiman.

"That should be our line," I objected.

"When did you get back from Bahairam?" Myusel asked.

In addition to being Amutech's live-in artist, she was also our smuggler —specifically, quietly helping to get otaku goods into Bahairam. I know that all sounds very cloak-and-dagger, but all I really wanted was for Elvia to help Bahairam realize the neat stuff that was available, and maybe to start thinking that it could be worth their while to be friends with Eldant. Call it an information campaign. Granted, when I suggested the idea to the Eldant leadership, I did deliberately use the phrase "cultural invasion."

"Just got back this morning!" Elvia said brightly.

All her movements tended to be exaggerated. Like, if she nodded, her whole body would shake as she flung her head up and down. It inevitably made her bulging chest, straining at her tube top, inescapably apparent.

And not only was her shirt basically an undergarment, her pants were low-rise shorts, so her midriff was completely out there. Maybe she did it for ease of movement, but this amount of skin, this amount of exposure—

let's just say it really caught the eye. The only saving grace was that the way she acted was so innocent, it didn't really come across as sexy.

"And so, uh, Shinichi-sama..."

"Everything went okay, right?"

"Huh...?" Elvia looked at me in surprise.

"Oh, uh..." I tried to put my response in the least unsettling possible way. "Actually, we were just at Eldant Castle by special summons. They said there seems to be more fighting on the border with Bahairam, and to be careful."

"O—Oh..."

Was it just my imagination, or did a cloud pass over Elvia's face?

"You just look like nothing bad happened, and I was glad to see it."

"I definitely get why Garius seemed so uptight, with stuff like that happening," Hikaru-san said from behind me.

"Yeah, no kidding," Minori-san said. "And you can't exactly go building a Great Wall just to try to keep the country safe."

"The people who kidnapped Shinichi-san made it all the way to this mansion, right?"

"They sure did. I know we're on the outskirts of the capital here, but that still puts us fairly close to the border. There is a mountain range that would make it hard to bring a big army across, but still..."

"U-Um..." Elvia said, looking anxious. "I-If it turns out, uh, that the Bahairamanian army invades, er... What happens to me?"

"Oh, you're okay, Elvia, you're fine," I said, forcing myself to smile reassuringly.

Minori-san, though, shrugged a little. "They've made an exception for you, Elvia, but if someone from Bahairam were to enter Eldant unofficially, illegally... well, they'd probably be arrested and executed."

"E-E-Executed?!" She stiffened.

Minori-san didn't hold back. "That's what would have happened to you if Shinichi-kun hadn't intervened. He pushed to keep you on as our artist because of your drawing skills, but if you hadn't been an artist, there would have been nowhere to hide."

"Is—Izzat right? I mean... Sure it is..." She was nodding again. She suddenly looked especially pale—I wondered what was wrong. Was she still feeling guilty about having been a spy for Bahairam...?

“I told you, Elvia, they aren’t going to do anything to you,” I hastened to remind her, but she didn’t relax. What was going on? Was there something else she was worried about? “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“...I-It’s nothing.”

“Come to think of it, Elvia-san, didn’t you say there was something you wanted to talk to Shinichi-sama about?” Myusel asked.

“Huh...?!” Elvia sounded desperate.

“Is there? What is it?” I asked. Now that I thought about it, it *had* sounded like Elvia had had more to say.

“Oh, n-no, really, it’s nothing!”

“Yeah? But—”

“N-Nothing at all! I swear!” Elvia was practically shouting now. Then she spun on her heel and dashed back down the hall. Almost like she was running away...

“The heck?” I said, scratching my head. It sure didn’t look like nothing.

“I don’t know...” Myusel said, equally befuddled. I guess I wasn’t the only one who thought Elvia was acting strange.

Minori-san, meanwhile, was looking down the hall after Elvia. I was disturbed to see that her usual easygoing look had been replaced by the stern demeanor of a JSDF soldier.

We all ate dinner together. That was sort of a custom at Amutech—or at least at our mansion.

Minori-san, Elvia, Hikaru-san, and I were there, of course—but so were our servants, who never normally ate with their masters in Eldant society. They included Myusel, as well as our gardener Brooke and his wife Cerise, another maid.

Brooke and Cerise, by the way, belonged to a race called the lizardmen. They literally looked like walking lizards. Everything about them was lizardlike, including the fact that they were cold-blooded and laid eggs. That meant they needed a slightly different menu than the rest of us. Lots of raw stuff, primarily.

Having to prepare separate meals for different species meant Myusel, who cooked for us, had extra work to do, but Cerise had been able to help since she got here. Myusel told me meals were much easier for her now.

Anyway...

"So the upshot is, we need to have a special class where we teach the kids about how to be polite when they're doing photography," I said, summing up our day.

"I hope we can do it sooner rather than later," Hikaru-san said, sighing. "I can't stand getting my picture taken too much more." As a cosplayer, Hikaru-san was more than used to posing for photos, but there was a limit to his patience when it came to people taking pictures without asking.

"So far there's been no harm done, but we can't wait until after somebody secretly snaps a photo of somebody else," Minori-san said.

"Er... It might already be too late for that..."

"Huh...?"

"Huh? I mean, uh, nothing!" I said, shaking my head.

If Loek wanted to delete that photo before it became a problem, this was the time... though since Romilda and everyone had already seen it, it was already too late. Sooner or later, Minori-san would find out about that picture, and I imagined it would lead to a scolding Loek wouldn't recover from for a while.

"Myusel, doesn't it bother you when they snap a picture like that?" I asked, hoping to deflect the conversation in another direction.

Myusel had been listening to us without saying anything, and seemed a little surprised when the conversation suddenly turned to her. She blinked for a moment before collecting her thoughts. "Me? I just think... it's so incredible to be able to capture a scene in an instant like that."

Ahh, what a sweet, naïve perspective. Sometimes, hearing Myusel talk made me feel like a deeply polluted creature. I mean, obviously I'm not going to claim I'm always totally innocent.

"And it comes from the desire to keep photo-graphs of the people and places you care about nearby."

"That's true enough." (*Uh... if we're dividing motivations into affection and malice, I guess carnal desire falls under affection.*)

"If I had a chance, I'd like to—" Myusel glanced shyly at me, then quickly looked away. I saw her cheeks flush just the tiniest bit. Wait...

"Myusel, do you want a camera, too?"

"What? Oh, no, I could never..." She looked down and seemed to shrink into herself. She looked so modest, so restrained—it was unbelievably moe.

"It would be hard not to want one when you see everyone around you

using them, huh?"

"Er... Ahem, well, that may be partly true..."

I knew Myusel, and I knew she wouldn't be able to just come out and say that she wanted a camera—so I would have to say it for her. She probably didn't need a complicated DSLR or anything; a nice, small fire-and-forget daily model would be fine. If I asked, I could probably get one sent over with the next regular shipment.

"I don't think a camera is *exactly* what Myusel's aiming for," Minori-san interjected with a sly grin.

"Wha...?"

It wasn't?

"M-Minori-sama!" Myusel sounded uncharacteristically frantic. Minori-san seemed to be enjoying this.

Wait. What's going on here?

Was this what they called "girl talk"? (Note: probably not.)

"Anyway, I'll ask them to send over a camera for you, Myusel," Minori-san said. Then she glanced around the table. "By the way, speaking of cameras, I was thinking of having them print out some of the pictures we took in Japan. Myusel, Elvia, you want any?"

"May I?" Myusel asked.

"Sure. We'll bring some by for Her Majesty, too."

"That reminds me, I never showed Brooke and Cerise any of our Akiba pictures."

I had brought them some dried fruits and some Haku*** Kairo hand warmers as souvenirs from Japan, and I had already given them those—but I had never shown them the photos.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened my pictures from Japan. I held the phone out across the table so Brooke and Cerise could see.

"What is this towering fortress...?!"

Confronted with a photo I'd taken of Myusel in Akiba, Brooke didn't remark on our maid's wardrobe, but rather on the background. Considering Brooke was a former military man, I guess it made sense that he would notice the terrain right away.

"Petralka said the same thing. But it's not a fortress, those are buildings. We call them skyscrapers."

"And what unusual outfits," Cerise offered. (I guess it took a woman.) "But they look very good on all of you."

Brooke and Cerise were both covered in scales, so they sometimes didn't seem very expressive. It could be almost impossible to tell what they were thinking just from their faces, but by paying attention to their conversation and the general vibe they gave off, it was possible for me to tell that they were intrigued by the photographs.

"Seeing as Myusel and Petralka survived having their pictures taken by everyone in that huge crowd in Akiba, I guess they're pretty used to being in photographs by now," I said.

"True," Minori-san replied. "Considering how they started... That would impair anyone's judgment."

Strictly speaking, they had been in front of the camera before, back when we made our movie, and in Akiba a camera punk (but note: he was around thirty years old) snapped our pictures. But having a sea of cell phones and digital cameras aimed at you probably overwhelmed those other memories.

"Okay, we'll print pictures for Myusel and Her Majesty... What about you, Elvia?"

No answer.

"Elvia...?"

"Buh?!"

She seemed to hear us for the first time, looking up suddenly with a shiver.

"You seem kind of out of it," Minori-san said. "Everything all right? You haven't eaten much, either..."

She was right: almost all the food was still on Elvia's plate.

That was unusual. Elvia seemed to have what you might call poor mileage—the rest of us often watched stupefied as she shoveled food into her mouth. Myusel always made sure to give her extra-large helpings at meals, and she was still usually the first one done. Yet tonight, she had hardly eaten anything.

Come to think of it, she hadn't been part of our conversation at all, either. She just seemed really down somehow...

"Doesn't it taste good?" Myusel asked, concerned.

"N-No, that's not it at all!" Elvia said, and hurriedly began eating. "It's great, just like always!"

A moment later, though, her hands stopped again. She was definitely worried about something.

She'd seemed strange ever since she got back from Bahairam—or more precisely, ever since we had talked about what happened there.

"Hey," I said gently. "Are you worried about Amatena and Clara?"

Amatena. Clara. Both from Bahairam, and both people who had been involved with my kidnapping. And Amatena, as it happened, was Elvia's older sister. The two of them were serving with the Bahairamanian military in a little town near the border. Which meant, to our chagrin, that they would be on the front lines if war ever broke out.

At my question, Elvia stiffened. All the hair on her bushy tail, which had been hidden behind her chair, stood straight up as if she had gotten a big static shock.

"Sh-Shinichi-sama, why would you think...?" The strain on her face was unmistakable.

"Why? I mean..."

I thought it was perfectly natural to worry about your family back home.

"Incidentally, Elvia." This time Brooke spoke up, nonchalantly, almost as if he'd just thought of something.

"Y-Yes?! What is it?" Elvia's voice hit a new octave.

"That little shed I wasn't using—I cleaned it up and cleared it out. It's available whenever you might need it."

"Th-Thanks."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

This was the first I'd heard of it. Sure, the grounds of our mansion had several small sheds scattered around. One of them had been remodeled into a place for Brooke and Cerise to stay, but the others we just left, using them to store our junk.

"She asked if she might use it," Cerise said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Well, uh, er..." Elvia's hands were noticeably sweaty. "O-Oh yeah! M-My paints and stuff! I've got all my supplies and half-finished pictures and everything, and I needed a place to put them!"

"Couldn't you use your own room?" We had given Elvia one of the mansion's more spacious bedchambers. Had she really accumulated so much that she still needed more space? But when had she gotten all those supplies?

"O-Oh, you know... I just wanted to keep my work outside of the

room... Oh, humidity! The humidity is bad for them! So...” Elvia cut herself off and jumped to her feet. “I j-just remembered something I have to do! I’ll have dinner in my room!”

“Hey—”

Before we could stop her, she swept up her plate and rushed off.

“I wonder if something’s the matter with Elvia-san...?” Myusel said.

“She’s been acting weird ever since she got home,” I agreed.

Was she so worried about Amatena and Clara that she couldn’t even eat? But then why would she go out of her way to take dinner to her room? Was she planning to have it for a midnight snack?

Hmmm. Nothing quite made sense.

“Then again,” I said, “Elvia’s always acted a little bit weird.”

“True that,” Minori-san said. “Like the time she shoved you to the ground and jumped on top of you...”

“What?! Did that really happen?!” Hikaru-san exclaimed, shocked.

...Oh yeah. Hikaru-san hadn’t been here for that. He didn’t know exactly how Elvia got during her “phase of the moon.” I gathered Elvia had been doing laps around the mansion and other things to try to make her phase less overwhelming.

“Elvia comes into heat during her phase of the moon,” Minori-san said matter-of-factly. “And Shinichi-kun—well...”

“Oh my God,” Hikaru-san said, putting his hand to his mouth as if he had heard something vile. “Did you take advantage of her?”

“What? No! No, I didn’t!”

“That’s just what a man *would* say. Disgusting.”

“Hikaru-san, *you’re* a man!”

How could he act so detached?! If they had sent him instead of me to be Amutech’s general manager, he would have been the one who ended up on the floor, right? But then again, maybe he would never have tried to save Elvia in the first place? Hmm, but wait...

“It didn’t happen! Nothing happened! And *I* was the one who got jumped!”

“Ooh, a slutty bottom?”

“I! Am! Not!”

You (completely, totally rotten) WAC! Don’t go saying every confusing, misleading thing that comes into your brain!

“I didn’t do anything! Hey, stop, don’t look at me with that drawn,

searching face! I'm innocent, I swear! I want my lawyerrrrr!"

I felt like I had been framed—but nothing could get Hikaru-san's icy glare off me.

And so with this and that, evening came on.

I was in my office, trying to map out the curriculum for the photography course, when I heard a knock on the door and looked up.

"Shinichi-sama, it's Myusel."

"Come on in."

I quit typing on my keyboard; the door opened, and in came Myusel with a cart. "I brought an evening snack for you."

"Thanks."

The cart had sandwiches, a tea set, and a single cup.

Hm? Why was there a cup along with the tea set?

"I see you're working late," Myusel said with a smile, wheeling the cart over to my desk. She put the sandwiches next to my computer. "May I ask what you're working on...?"

Most of the time, Myusel just quietly left again after she had brought my snack, but recently, at my request, she had started staying to talk a little. Working alone at night, I sometimes found my thoughts going in weird directions, and chatting with her helped me take a step back and get some perspective on what I was doing.

"We need to sit the students down and teach them about photography. I was just outlining a possible course."

"Ah... You're thinking of this morning."

"Yeah. If we explain it to them sort of the way Minori-san explained it to Petralka, they'll probably get it... I hope. There are so many things that are common sense to me, that I have to remember need to be explained to people here."

"I see." Myusel nodded and passed me the cup. "Here you go."

I took it and looked inside to find a dark, translucent liquid. It bubbled a little—if I had to compare it to something, I would say it looked like cola. I had never seen it before; I wondered what it could be.

"What's this?"

"It's something I thought I would try making for my hard-working Shinichi-sama." She smiled gently.

Ahh! What a thoughtful, attentive girl!

"Thanks, Myusel. I mean... for everything."

"Oh, not at all..." Myusel's bashful reaction was itself innocent and adorable. I suppressed the overwhelming flutter of moe-ness in my heart by putting the cup to my lips and taking a sip...

"Brooke-san's tail is one of the ingredients."

I spat out the stuff in my mouth.

"Sh-Shinichi-sama?!"

"S-Sorry," I coughed, waving a hand at Myusel to indicate I was okay.

Ahh... The flavor that spread on my tongue, despite my aborted sip, somehow melded sweetness and bitterness—there was a hint of something smoky, too, a really sophisticated... sophisticated..... sophisticated what? Was that Brooke's tail?! Why would something like that be in there?! Was this traditional charred-meat medicine?! I knew I had heard that cooked lizard tails were used in traditional Chinese medicine to promote virility or something!

No, wait, there were more important things—

"M-My computer...!" Through my coughing fit, I looked at my laptop.

The stuff I'd spit out—the carbonated juice featuring Brooke's tail, if what Myusel said was right—was all over the screen, and dribbling down onto the keyboard.

Crud! This computer wasn't waterproof; if it got liquid inside it, it would break. Even if it didn't come to that, getting juice all over the keyboard would probably stop a few keys from working.

"I—I need something to wipe this up with...!" I looked around for a rag or a cloth or something. "Hrgh—!"

Maybe I looked a little too enthusiastically, because when I twisted around, I lost my balance and fell out of my chair. And I was still holding the almost half-full cup.

Meaning...

"Yikes!"

"Shinichi-sama!"

The cup went flying. I tumbled onto the floor directly underneath it. And so I ended up covered pretty much from head to toe in Myusel's mystery liquid.

"Ahh! My eyes! Ow, ow...!"

The juice must have gotten in my eyes, because I pressed my hands to them and screamed like a certain Colonel. But then I could feel Myusel crouching beside me.

"Are—Are you okay?"

"Er... Y-Yeah, I think so." I blinked a few times; the pain went away quickly as my tears naturally carried the juice away.

Myusel looked sadly at the ground. "I'm so sorry, I never imagined—"

"Aw, it's not your fault, Myusel, don't worry about it. You made it for me, didn't you?"

When you got a homemade nutrient drink, you were almost guaranteed a questionable product full of who knew what. The food and the tea Myusel made us were always so good that I had let my guard down.

Then again, considering how Myusel talked about it, it seemed like maybe including lizardman tail wasn't so strange to the people here. When I collected myself and asked her about it, it turned out that indeed, charred, grated lizardman tail had been an ingredient in that drink. Obviously you didn't just plunk the tail right in there; you just used a little from the very end. After a few days, Brooke would grow it back. The carbonation, meanwhile, helped mask the smell, while she had achieved the sweetness

with a big dollop of honey to counter the bitter flavor. If it weren't for my own preconceptions, there really wouldn't have been anything to object to about it.

"Man, though, is this stuff sticky," I said. The juice had soaked my hair, and I had to be careful even opening my eyes. I wanted to wipe my face, but it was all over my shirt, too, so there was nothing to wipe with.

"Shinichi-sama, how about you take a bath?" Myusel said, using her apron to dab around my eyes.

"Good idea... That would probably be quickest."

"Give me your hand... I'll guide you there," she said, and took my hand.

Ahh! I'm holding hands with an adorable maid-san! ...is what I would normally be thinking, and thanking God that I was born, but at the moment I couldn't even manage that. The juice was dripping from my hair into my eyes again.

"It's okay," I said. "I can get there myself, so maybe you could take care of cleaning my room—especially the computer."

"Oh, right away!"

"S-Sorry about this, Myusel... I know you made that special for me."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize." I could tell from her voice how heartbroken she was.

"I really appreciate the thought behind it, Myusel. People from my country just don't have a tradition of eating—or, uh, drinking?—stuff like that, so I was a little surprised... see?" I put a hand on the wall to steady myself.

All this fuss about lizardman tail (which, to be fair, was also part of the body of a friend of mine) mostly came down to a difference in perspective. I mean, there were tribes on Earth with traditions of cannibalism.

"So don't worry about it."

"Uh, umm... Th-Thank you very much, Shinichi-sama." Myusel sounded just a little bit cheered up. I used the wall to guide me out of the room and toward the bath.

Thus I found myself taking my second bath of the day.

I was always given the privilege of being the first person in the bath.

That was because of my status as the master of the house; that is, Amutech's general manager. That logic made Hikaru-san second, Minori-san third, and after that Myusel and the others. Honestly, the order didn't matter that much to me, but as Myusel, among others, flatly refused to bathe before I did, I ended up taking an early bath every night. Everyone was willing to eat together because we were simply all in the same place—everyone raised to equal social status, as it were—but when it came to bathing order, it seemed the master was going to be first and that was that.

Well, anyway.

"Ergh..." I stood next to the door in the changing area, pulled off my shirt, and wiped my face and hair with the still-clean back. "Ahh... That's the stuff."

My face and body were gooey, and my hair seemed to go stiff when I rubbed it with my shirt, leaving it in a 'do that sort of made me want to shout, "Awaken! Super Nihonjin Level 3!" But still. It was refreshing.

"All right, let's get in that bath."

I didn't want to leave poor Myusel to do the cleaning all by herself, so I would just rinse off and then go help. I sloughed off my pants and underwear, tossing them into the basket in the changing room.

"Oh... Oops."

I realized I had forgotten a change of clothes. Oh well, my pants were still wearable. I could pull them back on after my bath and go get something to change into.

With that thought in my head, I glanced into the basket...

"Huh?"

Someone else's clothes were in there, too. Short pants and a tube top. Were these... Elvia's?

"No way..." I said. Was this—you know? The infamous trope?! The one where she bumps into an old flame on the street corner and—I mean, the basic "Lucky Pervert" routine? Me, my beautiful female roommate, and a chance meeting in the bath? O God! *Megathanks!*

No! No! This was no time to stand around feeling ecstatic. Why, just earlier at dinner, Hikaru-san had been giving me the evil eye...

That was when the door to the bath opened from the other side. And who should appear, obscured by the steam, but a completely naked Elvia!

"Eeeeeeeeek!!"

There was a scream and a desperate attempt to cover a fully exposed

front—by me.

Both of us bumping into each other, naked in the bath! What a cliché! Elvia had her towel around her head, and her bouncing, springy, sproingy breasts were right there in front of my eyes! My very eyes! *Elvia, aren't you going to do something about that?! Are you going to let them just hang out there, staring at meeeeeee?! No, wait—or are you looking—looking at me—looking at my zxkgh (technical difficulties—please stand by)?!*

...And so on and so forth. Unable to resist the nature of a man, I stood there stiff as a board but couldn't tear my eyes away from the equally immobilized Elvia. And that's when I noticed...

"Huh?"

I couldn't see so well for the steam, but I could just make out her tail peeking out from behind her, and it looked kind of... white...?

"Elvia...?" I asked.

Or... not Elvia?

I forgot all about hiding my shame as I looked even harder, trying to figure out what felt off. Just then, the girl standing before me seemed to register what was in front of her. *Huh? Hey, hold on. On closer inspection—*

"Shinichi-kun?!"

Bam! The door slammed into my back.

More precisely, it was kicked into my back with the force of an explosion.

"Yow!"

And that sent me tumbling into Elvia.

And then...

"Shinichi-sama!"

"What's going on?!"

I heard a crowd of footsteps muscling into the changing area, and Myusel and Minori-san's voices. They must have come running when I screamed. The one who knocked opened the door like a SWAT team member assaulting a barricaded suspect was, needless to say, Minori-san.

"Urgh..." I shook my head, aware of a stinging pain in my back. My head was resting against something soft; that had helped me avoid a concussion when I fell..... Wait.

Don't tell me...

With a great deal of fear and trembling, I lifted my head to confirm the identity of the mysterious, pillowy thing I'd landed on.

Two magnificent hillocks spread before my eyes. Soft, pale skin rose and descended into gentle curves, as if calling out for me to touch them again, and indeed—

No, wait.

O God, my God, what is it you want of me?

Behold: Minori-san kicked open the door, which knocked me over, which knocked Elvia over, and, believe it or not, landed my face directly in the bountiful valley of her chest.

No, wait again.

What did that mean? It meant that the little bud, rising up from her breast to brush my cheek, was— must have been— Hrrrghzkd?!

"Sh-Shinichi-kun.....!"

Minori-san's voice cut through my technical difficulties and brought me back to reality.

But I quickly realized that staying insane might have been the better option!

"Have you finally—have you finally...?!"

"N-No! No, I haven't, Minori-san!"

What do you have against me, God?!

To put me in this situation... at this exact moment!

I scrambled to my feet, trying to make some excuse, trying to argue for my innocence.

I found myself confronted with a very startled Minori-san and Myusel. Minori-san had retained a modicum of composure, but Myusel was standing there shaking, her eyes the size of saucers and her hands over her mouth. She looked as if she had seen something unspeakable—as if she might faint clean away at any moment.

"You're the reason I'm in this situation, Minori-san!"

This was nothing more than a Lucky Pervert thing! There was no malice aforethought! This was just the sort of trope any shonen manga would deploy against its protagonist! Please believe me!

I looked pleadingly at Myusel. Minori-san's contempt I could endure, but if she, the oasis of my heart, were to regard me with a cold, scornful gaze, what a reward—er, I mean, I probably couldn't survive it.

Our eyes met.

And the next second, Myusel gave a voiceless shout, covering her face with her hands. Then, as if that wasn't enough, turned her back on me.

Was... Was it that bad?!

I stood dizzy with the shock for a second before I realized. Before I remembered what I was wearing—or in this case, not wearing.

"Eeeeeeek!" I sort of curled up and used my hands to cover what was between my legs.

"Maybe you could try for a more manly scream next time?" Minori-san asked with a touch of exasperation.

"P-Please don't be so calm! You could l-look away, at least!"

"Relax. I'm not looking."

Nonetheless, she politely turned around, putting a hand on Myusel's shoulder. I quickly collected my underwear and pants and pulled them on.

"We still waiting on you, Shinichi-kun?" Minori-san asked.

"Y-You're good. I'm decent now."

First Minori-san, and then, hesitantly, Myusel turned back around. It didn't bother me so much with Minori-san, but looking at Myusel made me feel distinctly embarrassed.

"Aargh... Shinichi can't be a bride anymore..." I groaned.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure Garius will still take you."

"*Stop that.*" This wasn't funny to me. "Anyway, this is your fault for kicking that door open, Minori-san... Oh, by the way, sorry, Elvia." I had been so caught up in my own humiliation that I had completely forgotten about Elvia, whom I had knocked over, even if it was an accident. Even if she didn't accuse me of sexual harassment or whatever, it must have been a pretty painful fall.

With that in mind, I turned back to the bath, but—

"Huh?" I didn't see Elvia anywhere. "Where'd she go...?"

"She showed herself out a few minutes ago," Minori-san said. Apparently, while I had been busy fretting about Myusel, Elvia had quietly left. I could see the basket no longer had her clothes in it. She had been shockingly quick and quiet.

But still... I stood in thought for a moment.

"What's up, Shinichi-kun?"

"Hmm... Nothing..."

I had been tangled up with Elvia once before (involuntarily, you understand), and not only hadn't it seemed to bother her, I even recall her saying something like that she wouldn't mind being jumped if it was by me. Even if she had been kidding, if she could make a joke like that to someone

who had just fallen on top of her, I had trouble believing she would just run away in embarrassment now.

".....Naw."

I thought about how Elvia had been acting strange all day.

About the white tail I thought I had glimpsed a few minutes ago.

And about how "Elvia" had slipped away just now without a word.

What in the world was going on?

There was no school the next day. I still got up at the same time, but it was nice not to immediately have to do anything. I could just do what I felt like, when I felt like it.

At the same time, though, since I had insisted that everyone eat breakfast together, I couldn't go arbitrarily changing mealtimes.

"G'morning..." I said, stifling a yawn.

"Good morning, Master."

"Morning."

"Good morning."

There were three people in the dining area. The first greeting came from Myusel, who was setting the table. Then Minori-san, then Hikaru-san. All of them must have been up way earlier than I was, but none of them looked remotely sleepy.

"I'll have breakfast ready in a minute."

"Sure, thanks." I smiled and went to pull out a chair. Glancing absently around the breakfast nook, I saw Cerise coming out of the kitchen, the food (made by Myusel, most likely) on the table. And then...

"Mornin'. I'm starvin'!"

In walked Elvia.

As usual, she was all smiles despite the early hour. I guess the events of the night before hadn't got her down at all. Me, I was still embarrassed and apologetic; I could feel the heat in my cheeks just thinking about it.

"Say, uh, Elvia..."

"Yeah? What's up?" She wandered over to me.

"I'm, uh... sorry about last night."

"Huh?" she blinked. "What about last night?"

It was like she didn't remember anything had even happened. Or maybe

she was so embarrassed, she was just deflecting? But...

"Oh, uh, I mean when I..."

It wasn't like this was a secret or anything, but it still didn't feel like something I wanted to share at the top of my lungs. I leaned in and whispered, "When I fell on top of you..."

"Whaaa?!" Elvia exclaimed.

My care and delicacy were all for naught. Minori-san and Hikaru-san, and even Myusel and Cerise making the food, looked over to see what was going on. And then...

"A-Aaammaaaaa!!" Elvia howled, balling her hands into fists.

She was obviously extremely angry—but a second later she realized what she was doing, and threw her hands over her mouth. Unfortunately, of course, it was too late to take the word back.

"Ama?" I said. "You mean, like... Amatena?"

"Oh! No, uh-uh, no, you can just, uh, ignore me!" Elvia pointedly refused to meet my gaze. But no matter where she looked, she found someone looking back at her. She started shifting uncomfortably—then grabbed her freshly-prepared breakfast in both hands. "I—uh, I'm going to eat in my room today!" she said, then sped out of the dining area.

The rest of us watched her go.

"Something *weird* is going on," I said, and everybody nodded. Something was wrong with Elvia, and everyone could see it. "She suddenly wants to eat in her room, use one of our isolated sheds, and sneak into the bath at night..." I crossed my arms. "If this were your standard anime, she would be secretly keeping a pet or something. You know, like a stray dog."

"You think a werewolf would adopt a dog?" Minori-san said drily.

"Humans keep monkeys, don't they?"

"That's not the point," Hikaru-san said in annoyance.

"What, you think maybe it's a cat? A bird? Maybe there's a whole litter in there?"

"Still not what I'm talking about. Listen, if nothing else, it's obvious that she's hiding something." Hikaru-san shifted his shoulders. "And she's a terrible liar."

"You've got that right."

Back when we first apprehended Elvia, it had been immediately apparent that she was much too honest to make a decent spy—her cover had more holes than a ratty dishrag. Her best play would have been to just keep

her mouth shut, but instead she got nervous when we started to suspect her, and that made her start spouting random excuses. And that didn't do her story any favors.

Just then...

"Sorry t' be late," Brooke said, ambling into the dining area.

With the exception of Elvia, then, we were all there.

"Looks like breakfast is ready," I said. "Might as well eat."

Once breakfast was over, I had nothing but time. We all split up to enjoy our day off however we liked.

Of course, there was no such thing as a complete day off for Myusel, Brooke, and Cerise; and Minori-san was technically on duty twenty-four seven as Hikaru-san's and my bodyguard. But the point is, we got to just lounge around the house in a way we usually didn't.

I decided to go to my room and get through some of the anime that had been piling up. The stuff that was airing in Japan was being recorded onto a hard drive and then brought over for me to evaluate. Obviously, I didn't have time to watch every minute of every show, so I would watch a couple or three episodes, and if it didn't look like something I was going to like, I would just take a quick peek at fast-forward or 3x speeds.

Even with that system, the data on my hard drives was starting to outpace me. I was hoping to really tear through some of it today.

With that in mind, I took a brimming teapot and some of the sweets Myusel had cooked up and settled in for a day of anime.

"Come to think of it, Dad's light novel got turned into an anime just recently..."

I grabbed the remote. And just then...

"Shinichi-sama?"

There was a knock on the door, and I heard Myusel call my name. I paused my show and went over. "Myusel? What's up?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt you while you're busy with your anime, but, umm..." She hovered uneasily in the doorway. "Loek-san and Romilda-san are here..."

"Say what?" Those were names I hadn't expected. School, as I mentioned, wasn't in session today. I hadn't thought I would be seeing

Loek, or Romilda, or any of the students. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll go see what they want.”

I turned off my electronics, and Myusel and I headed for the front door. Sure enough, there were Loek and Romilda.

“Sensei!” They rushed over, smiling, when they saw the two of us. They were both clutching digital cameras—wait, Romilda, too?

“Romilda, where’d you get that?”

It wasn’t a DSLR like Loek had, but it was still a pretty serious piece of equipment.

“I borrowed it from a Jay-Ess-Dee-Eff person!”

“Uh-huh...”

Several of the soldiers besides Satou-san had digital cameras for personal use. The military also had a few that were for official record-keeping of their activities. I assumed one of those cameras was now in Romilda’s hands. I guess Loek’s boasting about his camera had really gotten to her.

“Okay, that’s fine, but what are you two doing here? You need something all the way out here at the mansion?”

“Yes, Sensei. We’d like to charge our cameras...” Loek held up his device.

“Come again?”

The way they explained it, the two of them had been having a long-running contest to see who could shoot the most beautiful photograph. Neither of them, however, had a personal computer, so if they wanted to look at their photos, they had to do it on the cameras’ LCD displays. Looking at the screen outside, though, demanded turning up the brightness to make it visible, and those screens are surprisingly battery hungry.

These kids didn’t know anything about power-saving modes or how to turn off the LCD screen to conserve battery, so as they went around constantly shooting and checking their shots, they ran out of juice.

But having done that, they came up against the fact that there was no power grid here in the Holy Eldant Empire. There were just a few sources of electricity around: the solar generator by the school, a wind power station, and an emergency diesel generator the JSDF kept around. And Loek and Romilda couldn’t ask to use the JSDF one.

That left the school and my house, but school was out today, the building locked up tight, so Loek and Romilda decided my mansion was

their best bet. And that brought them to me, cameras in hand, begging for power.

"Please let us charge our cameras!" they chorused, dipping their heads. I smiled a little—for all their fighting, the two of them seemed to be of one mind right now. Almost as in tune as the time they had piloted the Faldra to rescue me in Bahairam.

"I understand. Okay, come on in."

"Yahoo!" they exclaimed.

I couldn't quite explain how the sight made me feel. Myusel was adorable in a way that made me totally moe, but watching these two was something else—sort of the warm fuzzies you get seeing a puppy and a kitten playing together.

But anyway...

"Let's see, where's the best outlet for you to use..."

"How about the living room?" Myusel suggested.

"Okay, let's go there," I said, nodding and walking off.

"Oh, Shinichi-sensei," Loek said as if he had just thought of something. "Is Minori-sensei around today?"

"She's in her room, I think."

"Oh..."

He was visibly disappointed. I guess he had been hoping to bump into Minori-san while his camera was charging. Romilda glared at him.

Hmmm.

"Well, it's not like she'll stay in there forever, I guess," I said.

"S-Sure! Of course not!"

I just wanted to make Loek feel a little better, but his face lit up so much it was almost comical.

Romilda, though, frowned openly. "You aren't planning to take more pervy photographs of Minori-sensei, are you?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about! My f-feelings are completely pure...!"

"Oh really?" Romilda said, eyeing him. Loek was starting to sweat. They just seemed to be settling in for a good staring contest when Romilda sniffed and said, "Don't forget our promise: if I win, you have to give me your cards."

Privately I thought, *Don't say that, Romilda! That's just begging to lose!* But...

“You just better hope *you* aren’t the one who ends up crying over your lost cards.”

Loek eagerly tripped the exact same flag.

Geez, you two are made for each other. I hope you stick together...

The point seemed to be that whoever won their photography competition had to give the other person some trading cards. These kids could sure be harsh in the weirdest ways. I think the classic bet would be “the loser has to do any one thing the winner says.” That gives you a little more room to, you know, use your imagination and have some fun. Oh well.

I didn’t figure the participants in this contest would be very good at objectively judging the merits of their photos. I had to wonder if they had some kind of standard.

All this was running through my mind as Myusel and I showed Loek and Romilda through the house.

Since they had come all the way here, I suggested Loek and Romilda have their photo contest at the mansion. That way they could just recharge their batteries again if they ran down, and more importantly, observing the two of them up close might help me understand how best to teach them photographic manners. I would be running that photography seminar, but I didn’t really have any idea what the Eldant people might do when they got their hands on cameras for the very first time. Watching Loek and Romilda might give me some insight that would prove useful.

The two of them were thrilled, of course. When I thought about it, I realized that they were the first of our students to be allowed to wander freely around the mansion. The mansion that was Amutech’s headquarters. To them, this house represented ground zero for otaku culture, like an anime lover from the sticks who suddenly finds themselves in Akihabara.

And that led to...

“This! And this!”

“Ooh, look at this!”

“Loek, you’re in the way, move it!”

“Well, stop running in front of me when I’m trying to take a picture, then!”

And so it went, as they raced around the house taking pictures of my

bookshelves, my figures, even the kitchen and the dining area—everything they could find. They couldn't wait for the batteries to charge completely; they would let them fill up a little, then grab the cameras off the chargers, go running off, and come back again when the batteries were dead. Over and over.

They spent a little more than three hours taking pictures like this. When they had both just about filled up their cameras' memory cards, they came back to the living room and requested that I be the judge in their photography contest. Apparently I was supposed to decide which of them had taken the most good pictures.

"Boy, you guys really went nuts."

I was reviewing Romilda's photos from her digital camera and smiling absently. Myusel was there too, as were Minori-san and Hikaru-san, who had come out of their rooms to join us when they heard that Loek and Romilda were here.

Myusel sat beside me on the sofa, Minori-san and Hikaru-san on the far side of the table. Loek and Romilda were lined up alongside us. I had my laptop open on the table where everyone could see it, running through the photographs.

"Is this... Hikaru-san's room?"

The picture showed a closet full of Gothic-loli outfits. There was also a desk with a personal computer as well as a ring, some earrings, and other little accessories. Who else's room could it be?

"Yes, that's mine," Hikaru-san said, nodding at the photograph. There were several more pictures after that—more clothes, materials for making clothes, even a sewing machine.

"Your room was a blast, Hikaru-sensei!" Romilda said.

"Hoo hoo, thank you very much," Hikaru-san replied. He hadn't been very happy about the students taking his picture, but obviously it really had been just because they hadn't asked. If anything, he seemed to like the photographs. I guess a cosplayer would have to.

"And here's a hallway... And this..." Flipping through the photos, I came across a picture of a bookshelf. "...This must belong to Minori-san."

"Huh? How can you tell?"

"Well, these titles..."

I zoomed in on the books so the spines were clearly visible. There was *Super-M Spectacles*, followed by a slew of books with portentous names

like *He's a Demonic Master* and *Teacher and I Have a Secret*.

"Oh, no, that's my 'flesh-tone' shelf. Beginners should start with something softer and sweeter."

"I really don't want to start it at all," I said, shaking my head at Minori-san, who was reaching over to do something to my computer.

Wait, so there were books for "BL beginners" and "advanced BL-ers"?! Whatever; I didn't want anything to do with any of those. What was Romilda taking pictures of, anyway?

I may have been a little annoyed, but someone else in the room seemed downright shocked. "R-Romilda! Did you go into Minori-sensei's *room*?!" It was Loek. "H-How did I miss that...?"

"Minori-sensei told me I could."

"Hrgh!" Loek responded, grinding his teeth. I guess he had been showing restraint, sort of, by not going into Minori-san's room. Maybe that had something to do with my stern talk about "manners" and "knowing what people are okay with"—but when he saw Romilda had gotten those photographs, he couldn't help wishing he'd done things differently.

"Oh, look, here's one of Myusel."

"G-Gosh, I'm a little embarrassed..."

This picture showed Myusel doing the laundry. When I zoomed in, she blushed and looked at the ground.

There were shots of Brooke and Cerise, too, apparently crossing paths with the kids in the hallway. Going through all the pictures at once like this gives you a pretty good idea of the photographer's interests, their personality.

"You seem to like taking pictures of people, Romilda," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, let's see Loek's next."

I opened the folder of photos I'd copied from his camera. His pictures seemed to focus more on scenery. The garden as seen from the mansion's windows, for example, or the house as taken from outside. Huh. His sense for this stuff was surprisingly sharp. There were several shots with a striking feeling for composition you wouldn't have expected from someone who'd only had a camera for a few days. I guess it's always possible they were just lucky pictures, helped by the camera's functionality, but...

"Oh, you can see Myusel in this window. Looks like she's carrying the laundry."

A window of the mansion, shot from the garden, reflected Myusel walking along. And in the next picture...

"Is that... Elvia?"

You could see a beast girl just past the window glass. She was facing outside and stretching.

"Elvia-san said she would be in her room drawing all day today," Myusel said, leaning in to get a good look at the computer screen. That is to say, leaning over close to me.

Oohh... That s-s-skin, so s-s-soft on my a-a-a-arrrrrmmm...

Myusel probably wasn't even thinking about it, but her exposed shoulder pressed right against my exposed arm, and the softness, the gentle smoothness, the heat of her body—how hard did she want my heart to pound?

"Er—oh, this is that shed Brooke was talking about," I said. I pressed a button on the computer, focusing very hard so as to keep Myusel from noticing my excitement and getting embarrassed. The picture that came up was of an isolated shed. I assumed it was the one Brooke said he had emptied out for Elvia's use.

It wasn't very big. Although it had been doubling as a storage space, it seemed to have been built to accommodate a servant, should one need to live there—there were even windows.

And that was when I noticed: there was a figure floating dimly in one of those windows.

"Is that a gh-gh-gh-*ghost*?!"

"Huh...? Minori-san said, sounding skeptical.

"H-Here, look!" I said, hovering the cursor over the window of the shed. I selected that part of the photo and zoomed it in.

Then I let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's just Elvia."

She had said she wanted to use the shed for her pictures and paints and stuff, so of course she might show up in any given photo of the building. The camera had chosen to focus on the window pane, so Elvia herself was fuzzy and indistinct, which had made her look like a ghost to me.

But then...

"Isn't that a little strange?" Hikaru-san murmured. "There was a picture of Elvia-san just a few shots ago, right?"

"Oh... yeah."

"And digital cameras play back shots in the order they were taken, so

how did Elvia-san get from her room to this shed?"

"Maybe she just, you know, moved around," I said, going back to the folder of pictures.

There was the photo of Elvia stretched out in her room we'd seen earlier.

And here was the one of her standing in the shed.

No problem, right? But Hikaru-san pointed to the timestamp on the files. "Look. These two photos were taken at almost the exact same time."

He was right: there was hardly a minute's difference between them.

Could Elvia, considering her speed, have run from her room to the shed in less than a minute? If she ran as fast as she could, then maybe—and if she jumped through the window of her room, she could get there even quicker. But would she do that?

"And didn't Elvia say she was going to be in her room all day?" Minori-san asked.

"Y-Yes, she did..." Myusel said hesitantly, nodding.

"But then..."

Just to be sure, I took another look at the pictures. The Elvia in her room and the Elvia in the shed both looked more or less like her. Shed Elvia was kind of fuzzy, but I zoomed in, and it sure looked like her to me.

"Wh-What's going on...?" I felt Myusel grab my sleeve. Maybe she was a little frightened.

Loek and Romilda finally processed what Hikaru-san was talking about; they both paled. I didn't know exactly if this world had any concept of ghosts or doppelgängers, but they certainly seemed to share our discomfort at the weird and seemingly unnatural.

"A-An exorcism!" I exclaimed. "We have to do an exorcism! But do we exorcise Elvia?! Or Loek, who took the picture?!"

"Me?!" Loek said, frozen with his eyes wide open.

I guess they knew something about exorcisms here.

"Calm down, Shinichi-kun," Minori-san broke in, smiling wryly. "Anyway, if that's really Elvia, then it would be a living ghost."

"Huh, that's true..."

"The real question is, why would Elvia be there, right?" Minori-san said, sounding like she'd had an idea.

I enlarged the photo of the shed again, squinting at the figure of Elvia in the window. It was kind of hazy, sure, but Loek's digital camera was high-

quality enough that a little bit of fiddling with the uncompressed file in a photo retouch program could gain us some extra clarity.

The Elvia we saw was expressionless. It was like she had killed all her emotions—almost unimaginable compared to the bright, cheerful girl we knew. If there was any question which one was the ghost, I thought we had our answer.

There was just one thing.

"Minori-san, does that look like—"

"Yeah. I think so."

She seemed to have noticed it, too.

We nodded to each other, but Myusel and the others looked just as anxious as ever.

Chapter Two: More than Just a Palette Swap

Midnight... With the lights doused in the hall, a lone, barefoot figure crept through the house.

Looking furtively from side to side, trying to walk as quietly as possible. Attempting to be totally inconspicuous. Silent but swift, like a thief sneaking in for a burglary.

She finally reached the changing room and opened the door.

Perfect timing.

“Yo, Elvia.”

She caught her breath, startled by the unexpected voice.

Then the beast girl with the towel in her hand saw me and Hikaru-san. We had been standing there, trying not to breathe. I’m pretty sure she hadn’t expected to run into us in the middle of the night, least of all smack in front of the changing room. “Elvia” was completely alert now. Her expression seemed to ask, *Why? How?*

But we wanted to know the same things.

“Little late for a bath, isn’t it?” I asked, grinning.

“Elvia” was lost for words for a second, but then she swallowed once and got herself together. She nodded firmly. “Yes, it is.”

“Ohh. It is, is it?”

“Indeed it is.”

Then we lapsed into silence.

The moment was intensely awkward, but “Elvia” never lost her composure. Compared to how she usually was, she was way *too* cool, almost like a different person.

I kept up the not-saying-anything game, but “Elvia” finally demanded, “Is that all you wanted?” Then she stepped to one side to push past us, almost like she was trying to flee.

“Hey, hold on.”

“Yes, what?” she asked dubiously, glancing back over her shoulder.

“Aren’t you gonna take a bath?”

She went quiet again.

I couldn’t say what Hikaru-san thought of her, but he did go up to “Elvia,” put his hands on her shoulders, and gently turn her around. “Now, that won’t do, Elvia. You mustn’t shirk your duties.”

“Er...”

“Wha...?”

A sound of surprise came at Hikaru-san’s words: one from “Elvia”—and one from me.

Uh, Hikaru-san? I don’t remember this being part of the plan...

“It’s your job to wash Shinichi-san’s back, remember?” he said calmly.

“*What?*”

“I know I agreed to cover for you, but that was only while you were in Bahairam. Now that you’re here again, I’m turning his back back over to you.”

“His back... back...?” the beast girl asked cautiously.

“Certainly. Of course, it’s sort of a figure of speech—but I’m sure you know that by now.”

“Meaning...?”

“Well, you do the front, too.”

He spoke before I could get a word in edgewise.

Just a second. The front? What front?

I mean, I thought I knew which front he meant, but was my mind in the gutter or did the way he put it sound super, super dirty? I had to admit, just imagining Elvia washing my back was extremely hot, but...

Well, at least now “Elvia” would cry uncle and we could all just—

“I see. Let’s go, then.”

“...Guh?” I looked over in surprise to see “Elvia” looking very determined. “No... Hold on, I...”

She didn’t give me a chance to make excuses, but grabbed my hand and dragged me into the changing room. I tried to resist, but her grip was like iron—she probably could have crushed an apple in that hand. I had no choice but to follow her.

“Wha... Whaaaaaaaaat?!”

I looked to Hikaru-san for help, but he just gave me a friendly wave and showed no sign of doing anything to intervene. In fact, he was clearly enjoying this.

What was going on?! How could he do this, after he had acted so offended when he heard about me getting jumped by Elvia?!

“Hikaru-sa—”

Still I tried to call out for help, but the door slammed shut, cutting me off from him.

Now there was no way out, and little chance of help. I was trapped...!

“U-Um...!”

My only hope now was to talk down “Elvia” herself.

She let go of my hand. I turned toward her and—

“Uh, listen, this—aaaaahhh?!”

The rest of my words disappeared in the face of the pair of massive boobs that greeted me, as irrefutable as if they had a *ba-duuum!* sound effect above them. Considering how quickly you can whip off a tube top, maybe I should have expected this, but...!

“Uh, okay, so listen, okay, this...”

As I babbled, “Elvia” ripped off the rest of her clothes and threw them aside. In other words, she was standing there just like the day she was born—or to put it even more concisely, she was stark n-n-n—!

“What are you doing? Er, oh, I guess undressing is part of your duty.”

I stood there, frozen stiff. Elvia nodded as if to herself—and then set about undressing me too.

How did this happen...?

I was seated on a little wooden stool in the bathing area, staring as hard as I could at the wall in front of me and distracting myself by trying to count by prime numbers.

I was absolutely, completely cornered.

I had a towel around my waist, and there was a wall in front of me. But behind me was “Elvia,” buck naked, not even a towel. I had nowhere to run; it was never going to be that easy. A wall ahead and a wolf behind, you might say. Of course, had I wanted to, it would have been so easy to see—and *be* seen. See what, exactly? Everything, including “what.”

This was a situation I’d encountered in two dimensions plenty of times, but when I found myself actually thrown into the middle of it, boy, was I panicked and confused. I could hardly think. I’m not exactly the hardiest

guy out there, and with this level of stimulation, I didn't know my how from my where from my who was doing what.

This was the first time something like this had ever..... actually, no, it wasn't.

Back when I had been kidnapped by Bahairam, my minder, a girl named Clara, had gotten into the bath with me. Come to think of it, she had hugged me from behind, and I hadn't been able to think any more clearly than I was now.

Seriously, what was the story with Bahairam's views on shame and chastity? Or were beast people just special that way?

"I'll begin, then." The beast girl behind me sounded as stiff as if we were starting a duel, not a bath.

No... wait. Begin? Begin what? Just washing my back, right? That's all, right?

"Heek!" My confusion was pierced by the sense of something soft pressing against my skin.

Wasn't she going to use a... cloth to wash my back...?

I could feel soap. Had she applied it directly to her hand...?

"W-Wait just a secoooond!"

Doesn't washing someone's back just involve running water over them?! Oh yeah, Hikaru-san mentioned both back and front—wait, not the point! What about a towel?! Maybe her country had a tradition of washing with hands instead of towels?! Even when you were washing someone else?! Was this some you-know-what-kind-of shop?!

My brain was already heated so hot it was shaking. (Meaning unknown.) Just having a naked girl this close to me was almost more than I could bear—having her sudsy hand on me, even just on my back... It's sort of tickled, but it also felt really naughty.

Arrgh. No, no, noooo, I'm gonna.....!

"Ah... Ah, ma... maybe we could...!"

I had to stop "Elvia" somehow, but my brain was such mush that I could hardly get any words out. *Calm down, just calm down, self! At times like this, just name* Prepure *generations! Yes! Uhh... First Black, then White, then Luminous, Bloom, Egret, Dream, Rouge, Lemonade, Mint, Aqua, Peach, Berry, Pine, Passion, Blossom, Marine... argh, what's after that?!*

“T—Time out! Seriously, wait...”

I stood up abruptly, hoping to at least get myself away from the sensation of the hand on my back. But instead I lost my balance. Just as I was about to catch myself, I stepped on a piece of soap—and went tumbling.

What a clichéeeee!

The words never had time to make it out of my mouth. “Eeyikes!” I exclaimed, falling over. I twisted, just trying to do something—but there was no going back, and I found myself tangled up with “Elvia,” square on top of her.

Just to recap: I was naked. “Elvia” was naked. Even my towel had abandoned me... meaning there was nothing, not even a sorry piece of cloth, between us to keep our skin from touching, to keep the soft, warm softness from softly...!

Neither of us said anything.

Even “Elvia” couldn’t help being a little surprised by this turn of events; she looked up at me with a hint of a frown. I could only look back, still totally flummoxed as to what to do.

You could have heard a pin drop in the bathroom. Well, maybe *I* couldn’t have. My head was painfully full of the pounding of my heart.

“Elvia,” meanwhile, squeezed her eyes shut as if getting ready for something she knew was coming.

Ahhhhh.

Bad news. This was such bad news. Physically and mentally, I was at my limit. My limit! My limit, you hear?! I’ll say it once more: at my limit!

Absolutely, bouncing up against, explodendingnomore (too intense; transmission garbled). As the denpa song of the turbulence in my brain went on, I thought for some reason I could hear Elvia shouting something.

“Big Sister!”

The door came flying open. I looked up at the familiar voice to discover a girl running straight for me. She was small-built and had pointy, cat-like ears on her head and a fuzzy tail growing out of her behind.

The blood drained from my face.

What was this hell I was living?!

“C-C-Clara?!”

Clara Belberith. Weretiger and member of the Bahairam military.

What was she doing here?!

Actually, when I thought about it, it made some sense. She must have been hidden in a shadowy corner of the changing room, keeping an eye on us. She was never far from the "big sister" she adored.

This was extra, extra bad. In a totally different sense from before. I figured all Clara could see was that I had shoved her sister to the ground in the bathroom. I shivered to think what conclusions she would draw.

"This is all a misunderstanding...!"

I didn't really have time to be shouting things like that. With the speed of a wild animal, Clara covered the distance between me and "Elvia"...

"How could you? Leaving me out of this!"

"...Uh?" I grunted.

The next instant, believe it or not, Clara started pulling off her own clothes.

No, wait! I've lost track of how many times I've said that already, but really, wait! What's going on with you?! Aren't you going to ram me off your "big sister" and save her?! Oh crap, I forgot—there's one other person she likes almost as much as her big sister, and it's me! She told me—ahhhhgh?!

"Clara, you've got this all wrong, please stop stripping!" I wailed. If she jumped on my back and I ended up crunched between two beast girls, I would finally I would I would ahhhhhh! "So you really *aren't* Elvia, are you? You're Amatena!"

"Clara!" "Elvia" exclaimed from beneath me.

Clara snapped to attention and stopped pulling her clothes off. *Ahh! Now that's an older sister!* "Elvia" sat up slightly and said, "You fool! You gave us away!"

"You think *she* blew your cover?!" I put my hands to my head. Amatena genuinely seemed to think we hadn't noticed anything until that moment. "Look... Amatena, Clara."

Thanks to the sheer ridiculousness of it all, I was able to get my head straight for a moment. I let out a sigh and looked at "Elvia"—or rather, Elvia's older sister Amatena and her subordinate Clara.

"Could you maybe start by just telling me what's going on?"

It took about half an hour after that. It was well after midnight, but a

lamp gave us light in the living room. Standing smack in the middle of which was Minori-san, her hands imposingly on her hips. Sitting uncomfortably in front of her were Elvia, Amatena, and Clara. Also, incidentally, myself and Hikaru-san. We hadn't been given a choice in the matter.

"Okay, I'd like to start hearing some explanations," Minori-san said. She was smiling, but you could almost see the vein bulging in her forehead, like in a comic book. I was a little worried about her blood pressure.

Uh-oh. Minori-san looks pretty darn angry this time.

The commotion in the bathroom had brought Myusel and Minori-san running not long after Clara had joined the fray. Minori-san, who had gone one-on-one with Amatena before, was understandably serious about controlling the situation. Specifically, she'd pulled her gun and informed the beast girls that if they didn't follow her orders, she would shoot. Amatena and Clara had seen Minori-san and Myusel use firearms when they rescued me from Bahairam, so they were well aware of how powerful the weapons could be. Somewhat to my surprise, they turned meek as lambs.

Amatena and I (completely naked) and Clara (half naked) were at least permitted to put on our clothes, but after that Minori-san marched us straight to the living room. Hikaru-san, whose proximity to the events made him a suspect, was given the same treatment. Then there was Elvia, who couldn't possibly be innocent in all this. So Minori-san had Myusel call her in, and here we were.

All of us were silent, completely overwhelmed by Minori-san's anger. To my surprise, the first person to speak was Elvia.

"Uh—Um, uhhh..."

"Yes? You have something to say to me, Elvia?"

"I, uh, I've been secretly hiding Big Sis Ama and Clara here at the mansion! I'm very sorry!" She threw herself face first on the ground, so hard that her head clonked against the floor. It sounded pretty painful.

Minori-san regarded Elvia with an almost sleepy look, then finally said, "And?" She gave an exaggerated sigh.

"Uh? I—er, I'm not sure what..."

"We figured that out ages ago," Minori-san said, sounding bored.

"Wha?!" Elvia was shocked, *shocked*. Amatena and Clara looked at each other, equally surprised.

“Shinichi-kun and Hikaru-kun and I all knew already. You were acting so strangely, how could we not have?”

Yes, we’d known that Elvia was hiding Amatena somewhere. To be more precise, we had strongly suspected—but it turned to certainty when we saw that photo Loek had taken. The only thing that actually surprised us was that we hadn’t realized Clara was even here.

“You’re much easier to read than you think you are, Elvia,” Minori-san said.

“Urgh...” She sounded a little taken aback to hear it put so bluntly.

Then Minori-san sighed again and looked at me and Hikaru-san. “More importantly... Shinichi-kun, Hikaru-kun.”

“Y-Yes’m?” I said, my voice going up an octave. Hikaru-san was frowning.

“We talked about this, remember? I said Elvia was hiding Amatena, and Amatena was probably pretending to be Elvia, and that we should wait and see how things developed... right?”

“Yes...”

“All right. So how did things *develop* quite like this?” She crossed her arms and stared us down, and we both wilted under her gaze. “I was worried that Amatena or Clara might attack one or both of you if they were discovered.” Both of them were beast people, with physical abilities that vastly outstripped our own. They were also both trained soldiers. In other words, they wouldn’t hesitate to use violence—and it was likely to be very, very violent if they did. I assumed they could easily kill either me or Hikaru-san barehanded if they wanted to. I had my doubts whether even Minori-san, who was an experienced martial artist, could beat them in a one-on-one fight.

“That’s why I was going to do a nice, gradual investigation of this.”

“Sorry...” I knew Minori-san was only angry because she was worried about us. I felt there was nothing I could offer but an apology. “I’m the one who suggested we ambush Amatena,” I said, deciding that honesty was the best policy.

We had done it almost as a lark—knowing we would probably never get another chance to see Amatena pretending to be Elvia. She was always so serious, it seemed like it might be fun to tease her... *Seemed* like.

Honestly, I didn’t really think of Amatena as a citizen of a hostile country. For one thing, she was helping us to smuggle in otaku goods... but

she *had* been ready to pound a spike into my head at one point. Minori-san was probably of the opinion that we couldn't consider her an unqualified ally, and she was right about that. Who worked with you and who tried to kill you could shift with changing circumstances. Amatena had snuck into our mansion, and there were no guarantees she wasn't an enemy again. We couldn't completely trust her until we had a much better grasp on the situation.

"And I kind of... egged him on," Hikaru-san confessed, raising his hand. "I wanted to see this identical sister Elvia had... And as for who it was that caused Shinichi-san and Amatena-san to end up in the bath together... er..." Hikaru-san stumbled over the words for a moment, then went on, "I just... thought it would be funny to see Shinichi-san freak out."

"And what did you plan to do if Amatena had a weapon hidden on her?"

Hikaru-san didn't have an answer for that.

"Or if she had tried to kill Shinichi-kun, since her cover was blown anyway?"

Well, in that case, I would have just been dead.

"...You're right. I'm really sorry." There was no hint of Hikaru-san's usual confidence or condescending self-assurance as he apologized.

Hikaru-san had heard the story of my kidnapping, I assumed, but he hadn't witnessed it. The very existence of Bahairam as an enemy nation to Eldant was probably something he only knew by reputation. So he probably didn't fully appreciate how dangerous Amatena could be as an enemy—what might happen to us if she really got serious.

Minori-san glared at us for a moment longer, then said, "Thankfully, at least things didn't get any worse than they did."

I guess she figured scolding us more wasn't going to do any good. Her shoulders slumped and she looked away from me and Hikaru-san—back at the Bahairamanians.

Elvia was understandably subdued, and even Amatena and Clara were behaving themselves. Maybe they were waiting for Minori-san to let her guard down—or maybe they'd never intended to attack us. Given how things had gone, I had to think it was the latter.

"Amatena Harneiman and Clara Belberith, as I recall." The two of them nodded silently. "What would two operatives from the Bahairamanian military be doing here? What's your objective? The specifics, if you please.

I can't rule out the possibility we may have to hand you over to the Eldant authorities."

Yes, we had known that Elvia was keeping the other two women here. The question was why.

"...Elder Sister," Clara said, looking questioningly at Amatena.

Amatena give the smallest of nods, then met Minori-san's eyes. "A massive purge has started in Bahairam. We were among those under suspicion."

"Purge..." Gosh, that sounded dangerous. "But... suspicion?"

"We escaped by the skin of our teeth, so we don't have any details, either. But corruption in the military has been an issue for some time. Embezzlement, misappropriation of supplies. I think our superiors finally decided to bring down the hammer, and it looks like they took me for part of the problem."

"But why would they—"

"You can't imagine why?" Amatena said, looking at me with a hint of annoyance. "We've been smuggling in 'otaku goods' that *you* sent us."

"Well, yeah... but..."

It was true, I had been using Elvia and Amatena to supply Bahairam with otaku products—principally manga with translations written in next to the word balloons—but just as an experiment. Just to see how people would react, what might happen. Amatena wasn't getting any kind of personal benefit from it.

"Corruption and abuse of power... That could apply to just about everyone, right?"

"That's not the point. If top brass ever found out that we had been engaged in unauthorized trade with citizens of an enemy nation, they could charge us with sedition against the Honored Father-Ruler, and we would have no defense. If I were in the MPs' place, I wouldn't listen to my excuses, either."

So, she told us, they'd had no choice but to flee. And for good luck or ill, the day they decided to run was the very day they were supposed to meet Elvia to pick up another shipment of goods.

"And then I told 'em," Elvia said. "I said Shinichi-sama, he would help hide them."

"Oh... So that's what you were trying to bring up..."

That day, back when she had come home from Bahairam, Elvia had

been trying to say something to me. She must have been hoping to talk to me about Amatena and Clara. She must have thought I would be able to give them refuge somehow. But before she could bring it up, Minori-san and Hikaru-san and I had started talking about the fraught situation between Eldant and Bahairam, and had even emphasized that any Bahairamanian military forces found in the area might be executed.

It was probably Elvia's first inkling of how precarious Amatena and Clara's situation was. Bahairam wanted them as criminals. Eldant would treat them as enemy combatants. But it was too late to flee to yet another country...

"I knew you would help, Shinichi-sama, but then I thought 'bout what would happen if Her Majesty found out and... and I knew I just had to do it myself..." Elvia hung her head. "I'm real sorry."

It was a pretty reasonable thing to think. Elvia had just been trying to protect Amatena and Clara in her own way. Granted, it was her own personality, totally unsuited to deception as she was, that had given them all away. But still...

"Huh?" Suddenly, something odd occurred to me. "Why would Bahairam be attacking Eldant if they're busy conducting show trials?"

A moment when your internal politics are at a boil is hardly the time to go attacking other countries.

Amatena, though, shook her head. "I'm speculating somewhat, but... those border skirmishes may actually be intended as a smokescreen to distract your country from our domestic strife. A period of unrest offers a perfect opportunity for another nation to attack, so Bahairam may be putting on an aggressive front as a means of defense."

"That makes sense..."

I thought back on Garius's comment about small squads getting in small battles. It turned out Bahairam was actually in no position to engage in larger-scale conflict. A series of small incursions would look like probing in advance of a major attack—but it was all a sham.

"All right. I understand what brought you here, but..."

I knew now why Amatena had come to Eldant, and what was behind the border disputes. But the biggest problem of all was what to do next. Amatena and Clara were not my enemies at this moment. They were just refugees, chased out of their country on false allegations, running to be with Amatena's sister. But they were also criminals who had once kidnapped me.

If the Eldant Empire found out these two were here... would Petralka or Garius be willing to overlook that fact?

I really doubted it.

This wasn't like the case with Elvia, who hadn't done any actual harm. The fact that these two had infiltrated Eldant territory and led a squad to within a stone's throw of the capital, Marinos, was impossible to overlook. Not to mention that they had then proceeded to capture a national VIP (that is, me). The Empire's reputation might take a hit if it decided to just ignore that.

One thing was clear: we couldn't hand Amatena and Clara over to the Eldant authorities. They hadn't kidnapped me out of malice, but simply because they were ordered to; they hadn't had anything to gain. They weren't bad people. And more than anything else, Amatena was Elvia's older sister. I couldn't tell Elvia to just abandon her.

For a long moment, Minori-san stood there, silent, frowning. She seemed to be thinking about the same things I was. Elvia looked anxiously from one of us to the other and back. Even Myusel did the same, though she technically didn't have a stake in this situation. Hikaru-san had a hand to his chin, mulling it over.

What should we do? What was best? What was right?

I wracked my brain, desperate to find an answer that would relieve the tension in the room.

We were back at school after the break, and cameras continued to be the hot thing in the classroom. Most kids were still shooting with their 3TSes, but a few of them could be seen with specialty digital cameras like the ones Loek and Romilda had, though no one knew how they had gotten them.

Professional equipment, though, took a lot of effort to learn to use right—it was tricky to take pictures that everyone could and would recognize as good work. In that sense, Loek and Romilda, who had gotten their cameras earlier and gone nuts with them, had a leg up on everyone else. Now the other students surrounded them as they proudly showed off the photos they had taken at the mansion the day before.

It was break now, and I was watching the students a bit distractedly. My head was full of what to do about Amatena and Clara, and to be honest,

though I might have been looking at the kids, I wasn't really registering what they were doing.

"Shinichi-sensei!"

So before I knew it, I found a crowd of them around me. It was pretty diverse: boys and girls both, of different races. But every single one of them had either a 3TS or a digital camera in their hands.

"Wh-What's up?" I said, coming back to the moment.

One of the students stepped forward to speak on behalf of the group. "At the next break, let us photograph your house too, Sensei!"

"...Huh?" I said dumbly. Other students added their voices in a chorus:

"It's no fair only Loek and Romilda get to do it!"

"I wanna see Hikaru-sensei's closet, toooo!"

"I want to check out your otaku goods, Sensei!"

Every student seemed to have something they wanted to see.

Ahh... After Loek and Romilda showed off their photos, the others naturally wanted to shoot the mansion, too. It probably didn't hurt that at my place, like at school, they wouldn't have to worry about their batteries.

"It's okay, isn't it, Sensei?"

The students pressing around me looked at me with expectant eyes. Some of them had clasped their hands together and were bowing to me. What was with these displays of absolute and total passion? Was this how far cameras had come?!

"Er, uh, well, okay. Sure." I nodded, overpowered by the collective student gaze. I *had* let Loek and Romilda in. I could hardly turn down the other pupils.

"Woo-hoo!" The students cheered, punched the air, and high-fived each other.

Hmm. All right, so I had essentially capitulated to group pressure, but when I saw how happy they were, I couldn't help feeling good myself. "Is it that great? There's nothing really special there."

"That's so not true!" the kids responded. "This is *you* we're talking about, Sensei—your room must be full of posters and body pillows and stuff, right?"

"I'll bet you've got it set up so you can reach your computer without ever leaving your bed, don't you?!"

"I heard you have a special portable bathroom called a PET bottle!"

"What was it you said you do when you need food? Knock on the

wall?”

“Dummy. That’s the floor! It’s a ‘floor-knock’!”

I keep thinking I’m used to this place, but then I’ll hear an elf using a word like ‘floor-knock,’ and it’ll all turn surreal again. I can practically hear the sound of my beautiful illusions shattering. But anyway...

“Where did you even learn a word like that?!” I exclaimed. “And for that matter, don’t you think it’s kind of mean to apply it to me?!”

They weren’t wrong: during my shut-in days, I *had* made sure my manga, drinks, and other stuff were all within arm’s reach so I didn’t have to leave my bed. But still!

“Awesome! We’ll see you at the next break, then, Sensei!”

“I can’t wait!”

The kids weren’t listening to me at all; they were too busy cheering and congratulating each other. They looked so earnest, so sincerely thrilled, that even I couldn’t suppress a smile.

In Japan we have an expression, “Clothes make the man.”

“Welcome home, Shinichi-sama, Minori-sama, Hikaru-sama.”

When we got back to the mansion, we were surprised by the adorable maids who came out to greet us.

“Nice to be back, Myusel.”

One of them, needless to say, was Myusel. She was in her maid uniform as always, her sweet smile an oasis for my heart. Her very existence was like a balm to me. She was the person from this world I’d known longest of all, and even though she was my maid, it still felt fresh and new every time I saw her.

“Welcome home.”

Standing beside Myusel was an expressionless beast girl.

It was Clara, showing no obvious discomfort at being dressed in a maid uniform. The design was the same as Myusel’s—kind of French-y, kind of maid-y, with her thin shoulders peeking out just a bit. From one perspective, you could call it a little inflammatory: there was enough skin showing to be a bit provocative, but in Clara’s case the effect was almost comical, like a girl who had gotten into mommy’s closet.

Anyway, there was also the little fact that the clothes Clara had been

wearing when I first met her had been far more revealing.

"That looks good on you, Clara," I said.

"Thank you," she said with a little bow. The green hair bobbed on her head, but I couldn't see the catlike ears that were a distinctive feature of weretigers; they were hidden by a frilly headdress. What we could see instead was a pair of pointy elf ears.

They were fake, of course. To be precise, we were using the headdress to hold her real ears down, while she wore these fake elvish ones instead. We were going with the story that Clara was a relative of Myusel's.

This was, clearly, a move born of desperation. If we ourselves had discovered Amatena and Clara in barely three days' time, well, it didn't seem like we were going to get away with just hiding them. We didn't have any setup for that, for one thing, and our house had a lot of visitors. Eventually, someone was bound to notice them—as Loek's picture of Amatena proved.

Just as clearly, though, we couldn't ask them to live in a storage room forever, either. So why not set them free in the mansion? It was the most obvious non-obvious thing to do.

Amatena was one thing; she looked exactly like Elvia. But with Clara, it wasn't clear at a glance where she came from. So if we dressed her in a frilly apron and said she was our new maid, she might be able to fly under the radar.

There was just one little problem with this plan.

The mansion where we lived was not, technically, our property. Strictly speaking, the Japanese government was borrowing it from the Eldant Empire. We couldn't just add boarders or servants willy-nilly. We had to let the owners know—which meant telling Petralka. We would certainly be expected to provide some kind of proof of who exactly Clara was.

The Holy Eldant Empire, though, wasn't looking for the same kind of proof as an organization in modern Japan would be. A good word or an introduction should be enough. Thus, Clara became a young elf girl looking for help from her "distant relation" who was working in a mansion on the outskirts of the capital—namely, Myusel. For the time being, we were employing her on probation, sort of like Myusel's apprentice.

Clara was wearing one of Myusel's maid uniforms, as modified by Hikaru-san. We hid her tail inside the skirt. Her ears, as I mentioned, we tucked under the headdress, replaced with a set of elf ears imported directly from Japan.

Er, by which I mean Hikaru-san had brought them with him in case of cosplay.

"Man, these things look so real," Hikaru-san had said with a big grin as he pulled them out of their box. They looked a little *too* real, if you asked me. Less like a cosplay prop than something out of a horror movie. The skin was like... I mean, at a glance, you seriously couldn't tell whether they were real or not.

"Japanese cosplay technology, hoo boy," Minori-san said with a wry grin. "They've got to be approaching Hollywood levels."

"Well, the Japanese *would* put all their skill and resourcefulness into something like that," I said. I couldn't imagine another country that would even think to try to make, say, cat ears that moved in response to your brain waves.

Still... with her ears and tail hidden, and augmented with elf ears and a

maid uniform, Clara looked every bit the adorable elvish maid. But...

"Yes?" Clara asked, tilting her head.

"Huh? Oh, no," I said.

There was just something... off. Yes, she looked like a maid, but she didn't *feel* like one. I thought it had to do with her expression. Clara rarely showed emotion, kept her hands smack at her sides, and always stood ramrod straight. It screamed *soldier*, and it didn't look very friendly. If Myusel were just standing there, she would have her hands folded in front of her, radiating a sense of composure. And if her eyes met mine, she would smile sweetly. These thoughtful little gestures were what made a maid a maid. Then again, Myusel had served in the military, too, so maybe it was just a matter of getting used to it.

Whatever the case, a quick comparison between the two of them made it clear that it took more than clothes to make a maid.

"Clara-san." Myusel seemed to have sensed the same thing herself. "As a maid, you ought to be mindful of the language you use when speaking to your master," she advised in a bit of a chiding tone. "Also, when your master comes home after a long, hard day of work, you have to be sure to greet him properly. Your hands should be in front of you, not at your sides—place them one over the other just below your navel."

Rather than biting back, Clara obediently followed Myusel's directions, placing her hands in front of her. She looked a little awkward doing it, but that was understandable.

"I'll go get dinner ready, then," Myusel said, looking back at the rest of us with a smile. Then she gave a little bow, turned neatly, and walked into the house. Clara—she was an apprentice maid, remember—followed her "mentor" a second later. The rest of us watched them go.

"I feel like I'm seeing a new side of Myusel," I found myself musing. Someone who hadn't known her very long might not have noticed, but there was a hint of strength, even severity to her that day. Watching her tell Clara how to act, she didn't sound like the retiring young woman I was used to.

Was it like in the proverb? "It takes a student to make a teacher"?

"You don't suppose it's her pride as a maid?" Hikaru-san said. "The girl's wearing a maid uniform and is supposed to be a maid. Myusel wouldn't want her besmirching the good name of her profession by not living up to standards."

That made sense. Those two factors—professional pride and

mentorship—combined to put an edge on her. This little act wasn't just for fun, it was about keeping Clara safe, which was all the more reason to take it seriously. From that perspective, the behavior was actually very in-character for Myusel.

"A bit of whip-cracking will be perfect. Clara *is* supposed to be here to learn how to be a maid, after all," Minori-san said, and I nodded.

"You're right about that."

The moment we arrived in the kitchen, Clara-san looked me right in the eye and asked, "What should I do first?"

"Oh—take care of this, please," I said, pointing to a basket full of potatoes. "I'd like you to wash and peel them."

"Understood." She nodded and took the basket to the sink, sort of pattering as she went. It was a fairly large basket and must have been rather heavy, but she carried it as if it weighed next to nothing. I suppose it goes to show how much power is packed into the body of even a small beast person.

Clara-san didn't talk much, and wanted something in attitude, but she seemed quite skilled at cooking and cleaning... Honestly, from a practical perspective, I felt there was very little I had to teach her. In fact, I was finding her to be quite a help at my chores.

It was just...

I was chopping vegetables, too; as I did so, I kept glancing at Clara-san.

"Yes...?"

I guess she noticed. She cocked her head at me even as she shook the basket to wash the potatoes.

"Oh, no, it's nothing..." Yes, she was supposed to be my "apprentice," but I realized too late that even so, stealing those little peeks at her was probably rude. So I gave a quick shake of my head, then changed the subject in an effort to dispel the tension in the air. "Er, so what was life like for Shinichi-sama while he was in Bahairam?"

It was my understanding that during his captivity in Bahairam, Clara-san had been chiefly responsible for Shinichi-sama's care. The only thing Shinichi-sama himself would tell me, though, was that he wasn't mistreated. He had never shared with me any details, or anything specific

that had happened.

"He was in my care while he was in Bahairam," Clara-san said, picking up a small paring knife and peeling the potatoes in a series of quick motions. "Shinichi-sama was not allowed to leave his room without Big Sister's permission, so I was charged with seeing to his needs."

I didn't say anything immediately. Did that mean she had been doing... more or less the same job as me? I didn't know why, but the thought produced in unaccustomed ache in my chest. It was a very strange feeling.

"Is... Is that right?" I nodded, forcing myself to start chopping again. I'd stopped without realizing it. I filled a pot with water to boil the vegetables.

"I would start by inquiring whether he wanted food, a bath, or me."

"*What?!*" There was a *clang* as the pot, full of water, slipped out of my hands and struck the counter. Luckily, only a little of the water spilled over. "So... So that means... you and... you and Shinichi-sama...?"

"We bathed together."

"Wha...?!"

I was embarrassed by the scratch in my voice, so obvious in contrast to Clara-san's toneless affect. It practically made me sound upset.

"Together, as in... the two of you...?"

"Yes. That is what 'together' means," Clara-san said with a nod. Her face stayed expressionless... but I couldn't help thinking I saw a hint of triumph there. I finally looked down at my hands, unable to hold her gaze. My face was reflected in the water in the pot, which was still settling. The distorted image of my features looked hideous to me, so ugly it made my chest hurt.

Shinichi-sama bathed with Clara-san.

No. It was more than that. She had been looking after him all the time he had been in that room, unable to leave... the two of them, all alone, every waking moment... and presumably every sleeping one, too.

I was silent.

"Myusel-san."

I still didn't say anything.

"Myusel-san. What's next?"

"Huh? Oh..." Clara-san brought me back to reality. Before I knew what had happened, she had neatly peeled our potatoes. "Uh, n-next, then, cut these, please. Into large chunks."

"All right."

I took the potatoes from her and exchanged them for a basket of vegetables. These, too, she washed quickly, and soon they were on the cutting board. The frills on her headdress and apron shook in time with her cutting.

Come to think of it, I remembered Shinichi-sama telling me he liked maids, and smiling. We had only just met. I seem to remember him exclaiming in joy when he first laid eyes on me, “IS THAT ***REALLY*** A MAID?!” I think that’s what he said.

According to Shinichi-sama, a girl became thirty percent more attractive just by putting on a maid uniform. It seemed there were many things that could improve a girl’s looks—glasses and a tail were apparently among them—but for whatever reason, Shinichi-sama seemed quite taken with maid outfits.

He had been so kind as to praise me on several occasions, so that I myself had become rather attached to what was in principle simply a work uniform. If it made Shinichi-sama happy, I began to think, I would wear it forever.

But... so what did that make Clara-san at this moment? How did she look in Shinichi-sama’s eyes? Although they were hidden right now, she had several of what Shinichi-sama referred to as “moe points”—her beast ears and tail. Added to her maid outfit, wouldn’t that make her look exceptionally attractive to him?

“Yes?” Clara-san asked again, once more tilting her head at my gaze.

“Oh, n-nothing!” I said, shaking my head.

A strange feeling of gloom was gathering inside me. Was it a good idea... to let Clara-san continue to wear that uniform...?

I didn’t know exactly what was right, and what was wrong. I couldn’t articulate anything concrete, but my feelings were starting to get away from me.

“Sigh...”

This state of mind left me vulnerable to mistakes. I lifted the pot, which I had refilled, and put it on the fire, determined to focus on my cooking.

While Myusel and Clara were making dinner, the rest of us gathered in the living room. Two Elvias stood in front of me and Minori-san where we

sat on the sofa.

Obviously there weren't actually two of her; one of them was Amatena, dressed up to look like Elvia. I knew that perfectly well, but I couldn't resist the impression that I was seeing double. We had hidden the most obvious differences between the two of them. In other words...

"Well, there you have it," Hikaru-san said proudly as he took them in. In his hand he was holding... hair spray.

That's right: Hikaru-san had used hair spray to turn Amatena's silvery-white fur, ears, and tail a brown color like Elvia's.

"What's this?" Amatena murmured, gazing at her newly brown tail. We hadn't really told her the specifics; we'd just gone to work on her fur with an unfamiliar tool. Even the normally unflappable Amatena was understandably surprised.

"It's something from our country that lets you change the color of hair," I said with a smile. "I don't think you can stay here forever, but you'll have to hide out for a bit while we figure out if you keep running or what. The easiest thing to do was to make you look like Elvia."

Hikaru-san added, "About this hair spray—if you shampoo yourself in the bath, it'll come out, but it shouldn't run if you just sweat or get a little damp. We'll have to redo it each time you bathe, and it won't be great for your hair, but it's better than a total dye job."

"You wouldn't want to use too strong a coloring on her tail or anything," Minori-san said.

"At least it's better than paint."

"Sorry about that..." Elvia said, deflated.

While she had been hiding Amatena from us, Elvia had been using paint to cover her sister's fur. But her paints were water-soluble, so a bath—or even a good sweat—would take them right off. The sweat droplets might even wind up colored. Like Hikaru-san said, this colored hair spray was by far the better option.

Elvia looked over at her sister, amazed. She reminded me of the doll we'd had made of Petralka, so much that I almost wanted to ask them to pantomime each other. As we sat there staring at them, though, Amatena narrowed her eyes at me. "What?"

"I was just impressed. You two look like twins."

"You think...?"

"He's right," Elvia said with a nod. She'd been living with us, which

was to say with Japanese culture, for a while, so she was slightly less shocked than Amatena by what Japanese products could do.

"Want to see? I'll bring you a mirror," I offered.

"I have a better idea," Hikaru-san said.

"Huh?"

He pulled out his phone, aimed it at Amatena, and waved with his free hand. "I'll take a picture. Look this way! Elvia, line up next to her?"

"Sure thing!"

"Wh-What's going on?" Amatena was distinctly unclear on what was happening.

Hikaru-san snapped away. Then he called up the picture he'd just taken and held it out for the girls to see. "There. Twins, right?"

"What's this...? A mirror? No. Magic? But..."

"It's called a photograph," I said. "This is from our world, too. You guys really do look alike, don't you?"

"Yes... So we do..."

Confronted with this irrefutable proof, Amatena finally saw that she and Elvia looked almost identical. Or maybe, now that there was no difference in their fur color to distract from it, she was noticing that even the cast of their facial features was virtually the same.

"I do foresee one problem with Amatena playing the part of Elvia," Hikaru-san said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"They may look alike, but if they don't act the same, this little charade won't last."

"Ahh..."

It sounded so obvious when he put it that way. Minori-san and I looked at each other. It was the same problem we'd had with the Petralka doll. Everything—expressions, gestures, tone—had to be the same, or the jig was up. For better or for worse, Elvia tended to be very expressive; the polar opposite of her withdrawn sister.

"Things are already tense between Eldant and Bahairam," Hikaru-san said. "Amatena has to look and feel exactly like Elvia so there's not a hint of suspicion."

"Well, sure, but..."

"And on that note," Hikaru-san said with a clap of his hands, "I'd like to get started teaching Amatena-san to perform!"

Amatena, startled, looked around at us as if she didn't quite understand. But honestly, the rest of us had figured Hikaru-san might say something like that. When we had been trying to get Lauron, the girl running Petralka's body double, to imitate the empress, Hikaru-san had been the one to instruct her in the finer points of gesture, expression, and tone. He had an excellent grasp of what to emphasize and what to suppress in order to fool other people.

"Teachin' her what?" Elvia asked, not quite grasping the situation. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen the work we did with Lauron, so maybe she didn't know exactly what was involved.

"Teaching her to act her part, you know? Like, making her walk with a book on her head, how to drink soup without slurping. That sort of thing."

"That's just teaching her to be *polite*, Shinichi-san, and it has nothing to do with what we're after this time," Hikaru-san said with calculated coldness.

"Oh, uh, I was just giving examples, you know?"

"I don't think Elvia would have any problem walking around balancing a book on her head," Minori-san said with a half-smile.

True enough: with her athletic abilities and sense of balance, Elvia could probably *run* with a book on her head and not drop it. But Amatena, a fellow werewolf, probably could too.

"Getting back to the point," Hikaru-san said with a cough. He took in Elvia and Amatena together with a gentle smile. "I'll need your help, Elvia-san."

"Uh, sure..." She looked a little anxious. She probably knew by now that nothing good ever came of Hikaru-san smiling like that.

"Okay, let's get started. First, Amatena-san, pretend you're Elvia and give Shinichi-san a big hug."

""".....Huh?"" Amatena and I said in perfect unison.

"Uh, Hikaru-san, I'm not sure what you've got in mind, but..."

Hikaru-san, completely ignoring me, said, "Come on, you have to pretend to be Elvia. If you can't even do this much, they'll find you out in no time."

I really didn't think Amatena had to give me a big hug to maintain her cover. In fact, why was this even necessary?

"...Very well." Amatena nodded and walked toward me. She might be stubborn, but she was still a soldier. When duty called, she would answer, in

spite of any personal qualms. And at this moment, Hikaru-san was effectively her drill instructor.

No, wait! I'd like to raise an objection!

Amatena wrapped her arms around my body, completely wooden.

Ahh. Yes, there may have been clothes between us, but that plump chest, that bountiful chest, I could still feel it pressing against me, and I didn't know whether it felt good or made me feel bad or... But Amatena kept pressing herself closer and closer, totally oblivious.....er, uh, Amatena-san. I think that's a little *too* tight...

We're moving past the hug stage here...

"Wait—that—ow! Ow ow ow!"

No response.

"My back! You're gonna break my back! My spine is going, here!" I could detect a creaking from my backbone as the hug—now practically on par with a boa constrictor—continued. "Amatena—Amatena, I'm begging you!"

"Yes, what?"

"This isn't a hug! It's strangulation!"

"A hug is simply the prelude to a choke technique, is it not?"

"No, it—yowowow!"

Hoo, that's a soldier for you! They see things a little (*very*) differently!

"Amatena, I'd like you to release Shinichi-san, please." At Hikaru-san's instructions, the hug from hell finally ended. "I would classify that as 'not Elvia.'"

"...Really?"

"Really. Your turn, Elvia. Show her how it's done."

"Huh? Can I?"

"Sure. Go nuts."

"Uh—? Nrgh?!" I had been rubbing my back like a grandfather nursing his old bones, when I found myself bowled over by a body slam from Elvia. "Hey—!"

"Shinichi-samaaa~~!" While I was still grimacing with pain, Elvia landed on me in a crushing hug. "Shinichi-sama Shinichi-sama Shinichi-sama!"

She nuzzled my chest and neck happily. And as if that weren't enough, she even started licking my face. If she had been saying "Arf" instead of "Shinichi-sama," she would have been the very picture of a puppy greeting

its master.

My back hurt even worse now, but, well, for this sort of hug, maybe it was worth it. Plus, with the two of us pressed together, Elvia's bountiful chest pressed just below my solar plexus, and it was somehow sort of... it was like it might or might not maybe touch my ecstasy.....

"E-Elvia, watch out, this is really—!"

I started to squirm, hoping to pull away from her just a little bit.

"Now *that's* Elvia," Hikaru-san said placidly, ignoring my struggles. "Give it a shot, Amatena."

"You want me to do that...?"

"Uh-huh. We need you and Elvia to be indistinguishable."

There was a moment of what seemed to be reluctance on Amatena's part, but her expression was neutral again, and following Hikaru-san's instructions, she glommed onto me.

Oof. My mistake, trying to sit up. It exposed my back. Since Elvia was still hanging onto the front of me, Amatena came at me at an angle from behind, wrapping herself around me.

Oooohhhh...!

Now the meat in a beast girl sandwich, I was starting to sweat. Elvia and Amatena both had generous chests, and both of them were wearing tube tops—basically underwear. Like, shoulders out there, collarbones out there, midriffs out there, we're talking practically naked. And I hadn't been expecting this, so I was just wearing one thin shirt. It was the only thing defending my rationality from assault.

Ahh, but those soft boobs, the boobs, they came from in front and behind, from in front and behind, and so even so I so...!

Crap, uh-oh, oh no! This was getting dangerous. I could end up losing my dignity—specifically, the dignity between my legs!

"Okay! Now stay right up close to him and start nuzzling his face and head!" Hikaru-san ordered, clearly having fun. The two girls obeyed him immediately.

Noooo you can't, stoooorrrffff!!

"Dammit Hikaru-san, you're enjoying this, aren't you!"

"Who, me?" he said innocently, and looked off into the distance. But I spotted his lip and cheek trembling. "I'm just trying to teach a person to act."

"Why, you—! Arrgh! Minori-san!"

Yes, Minori-san! Minori-san would save me! She—

“Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, looking down at my hand outstretched desperately for help. “Lucky you. A beast girl harem! ☆”

“Some bodyguaaaaaard!”

Even she was obviously amused by this. Giving me a big thumbs up, she pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“...Wait, Minori-san, no pictures! You too, Hikaru-san! Argh, Elvia, not there! Nooooo?!”

...And so it went.

I wasn’t finally released until a good ten or fifteen minutes later, after Hikaru-san had had his fill of making me a dog toy.

After dinner and a bath, I sat down at my computer in my room to sort out the photography seminar I was going to do at school. I wasn’t even sure yet if I was going to run it as a special course outside of our normal classes, or somehow add it to the general curriculum. Since not all the students had a 3TS or a digital camera, making everyone sit through the class would be kind of pointless.

So how to approach this?

As I was thinking over my options, I heard a knock at the door. It was probably Myusel with my evening snack. A glance at the clock on my computer, though, showed she was a little earlier than usual.

I got up and opened the door, and found myself confronted with... not Myusel, as I’d expected.

“Amatena? What’s up?”

Instead, it was Amatena, who was wearing Elvia’s clothes. She must have just come from the bath, because her hair was back to its normal white color. It wasn’t like we were expecting any visitors at this hour, so it was probably fine.

“There’s something we must discuss. Are you available now?”

“Er, yeah, I guess, but...”

I motioned her into my room and sat down in my chair. Amatena, though, didn’t take the other chair I pointed to; she stood in front of me and bowed her head.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“You have my thanks for hiding me.” Her tone was indifferent, but her words were unmistakable.

“Aw, don’t worry about it. C’mon, stop bowing. It really isn’t a big deal. Not to mention, it’s a little early to relax. You aren’t the most convincing Elvia in the world.”

Incidentally, Hikaru-san might have started his so-called training by teasing me, but he did settle down and give Amatena some genuine advice on how to act like Elvia. Even so, the stiff, precise Amatena found it difficult to behave quite like her sister. It wasn’t something she was going to pick up in an evening. For the time being, we decided that when there were visitors, we would hide Amatena in her room, where she would try to stay away from the windows.

“I guess it would be hard to act like Elvia no matter how good an actress you were,” I said. “Seeing as she doesn’t even know how to lie.” I smiled a little.

“That is certainly true.” I was surprised to hear Amatena sigh. “She gives herself away at every turn, to say nothing of every word. Everything shows on her face. That’s the worst thing about her.”

I guess, from a soldier’s perspective, Elvia left something to be desired in terms of surviving in a society built on competition.

“But I really feel... relaxed when I’m around her,” I said.

“Relaxed?”

“It’s like, I know she’ll just say what’s on her mind... She’s so open that I never feel like I have to dance around anything with her, I guess...”

It could be surprisingly hard work to be around flatterers all the time. Knowing that the person you were with would just say whatever was on their mind—it had a way of putting you at ease. All right, you didn’t want someone who would literally say *anything*—who would be mean or constantly teasing you or whatever. A little bit of restraint was necessary. But still.

“Hmm...” Amatena crossed her arms and frowned thoughtfully.

“‘Cool beauty’ is great and all, but if you always go around looking aloof, or like you’re about to kill something, it can make people worry about what you’re thinking—”

Speaking of thinking, I really hadn’t before I said that. I quickly cut myself off, afraid Amatena would feel I was being critical of her. But she

didn’t seem particularly bothered. The only hitch was that she didn’t seem to get what I meant by “cool beauty.” Well, she could probably figure it out from context.

“Yet...” Amatena’s face remained impassive. “To allow your thoughts and feelings to show spontaneously is a vulnerability.”

“A vulnerability...?”

“Something your opponent can exploit. That’s why Elvia has no future in the military.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“You and your foe are constantly trying to read each other. To know the enemy without allowing him to know you—there’s nothing more fundamental,” Amatena declared.

Hmm...

I understood what she was trying to say. When you were face-to-face with an enemy, you couldn’t be too obvious about what you were thinking. And that didn’t just go for when a Bahairamanian soldier was facing down an Eldant knight or something—someone from another faction in your own organization could be just as much your enemy. If ‘having a future’ meant winning those sorts of encounters, then there was no question that a face like an open book was a disadvantage.

“But doesn’t that make you tired?” I said softly.

“Tired?” Amatena cocked her head as if I was speaking a foreign language.

“Yeah. I mean, emotionally.”

She paused. “I don’t understand.”

I looked up at Amatena from my chair—and then I had a thought. I beckoned her over. She came around the desk toward me, and I turned my computer so she could see it.

“Look at this.”

“At what?”

I pulled something up on the screen—a photo from the training session earlier that Hikaru-san had sent me. It might have been taken on a phone, but the resolution on those tiny cameras was nothing to sneeze at.

“But this is...”

The photo I was showing Amatena was the very first one we had taken of her, her face a mask of surprise. It showed none of the cool composure she normally put on; it could have been the face of any young woman.

“The way you look here. It’s... cute. I guess I mean, it puts people at ease.”

I considered that a compliment, but if I had been hoping to get a “Is this really me...? (blush!)” reaction by showing Amatena a new and attractive side of herself, I was disappointed. The Bahairamanian soldier just frowned.

“I look completely defenseless.”

“Well, look, if you never have an unguarded moment... it’s kind of like saying to everyone you meet, ‘I don’t trust you. You’re my enemy.’ And it sort of stings to be treated that way.”

Amatena didn’t say anything to that. She just blinked, as if it had never occurred to her.

“I just want you to know that not everyone is going to take advantage of you the moment they see an opening, okay? There are a lot of people who would actually want to help you. But you keep all of them at arm’s length.”

For a long beat, Amatena looked at the ground, deep in thought. Then, suddenly, she looked up, straight at me. “Do you think that is the way I feel about you?”

“I understand that’s not what you think of us right now.”

If Amatena really believed we were her enemies, she would never have come here, no matter how many assurances she had from Elvia. She would never have let Hikaru-san give her instructions on how to be like Elvia. Her prickly attitude toward us was just a matter of lifelong habit.

“So that’s how you see me.” Amatena put her chin in her hand thoughtfully.

“More or less.”

There was a pause. “I see.” It was almost a whisper, and then she was lost in thought again.

And so but anyway... the next day arrived. Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I were at the castle for our before-school audience. Myusel didn’t have class to teach today, so she was at home with Clara, continuing to show her the ropes of being a maid. Clara was every bit as dedicated as Amatena to remaining completely expressionless, so I had to imagine that teaching her a little warmth was going to be the hardest part of the job.

In any event...

We were in the same audience chamber as usual; Petralka was seated on her throne as usual; and just as usual, she was flanked by Garius and Prime Minister Zahar.

"Er, ahem..." I started with my daily report; that is to say, the current state of Amutech's activities as well as the school. I wrote out these reports too, but I figured they might be easier to understand if I told Petralka myself, and she encouraged me to do so. It was really no problem, especially in that it meant I got more time to see her.

The empress and her attendants nodded as I finished my report. But then...

"A new maid?" Petralka asked, raising an eyebrow at the very last thing I'd tossed out there. Obviously, I had been talking about Clara.

"Yeah. She says she's a relative of Myusel's, so we thought we would hire her. That okay?"

"If in your judgment you need more hands to share the work, then of course we've no reason to object, but... but with this, yet one more woman is serving in your circle, no...?"

"Serving in my...? I mean, it's not like she's attending to me personally."

And to be accurate, it wasn't one woman, it was two. But I could hardly say that.

"Your Majesty," Garius said pointedly. "I believe there is a more important matter to raise this morning..."

"Mm? Ah, yes." Petralka nodded, though she didn't look thrilled about it.

It was Garius, though, who explained exactly what this more important matter was.

"We've already mentioned to you the unusual movements we've been seeing from Bahairam recently." I had to work hard to squelch a flinch at that. I had an unpleasant thought that maybe they had discovered Amatena and Clara—but if so, wouldn't they have mentioned it when I brought up my new maid?

Minori-san voiced the question I was too nervous to ask. "Has something happened?" That was an adult woman—and soldier—for you: her tone was completely level, with no hint of any personal concern. Her self-control was absolute.

“By compiling reports from our spies, we’re beginning to get a picture of the domestic situation in Bahairam,” Garius said.

Just like the Kingdom of Bahairam was sending boatloads of spies (like Elvia) into the Holy Eldant Empire, our nation was likewise sending agents over there. Like for like, for sure. And the information they had come up with?

“It seems a major purge is being conducted in the Bahairamanian military.”

“You mean...”

That would line up exactly with what Amatena had said.

“In other words, significant reforms are being made in their military. Obviously, that leaves them unable to undertake normal military action. If I had to guess—and at this point we do—I might say that the incursions are a bluff, a distraction to keep us from noticing what’s happening there.”

Again, just like Amatena told us.

“I doubt Bahairam has any serious intention of attacking us. That doesn’t quite mean we can relax, but we don’t have to be too touchy.”

It seemed Eldant’s military minds had concluded that despite the large number of border skirmishes, they weren’t the prelude to a large-scale invasion.

“But why would they be purging anything?” I asked.

“Bahairam is a country of extremes,” Garius said. “Not just the military, but the entire national structure, has been refined over the past several generations. The system doesn’t have the force of history behind it—it’s like a hastily built house, full of weak places. As such, they may expound equality under their king, but the shadows of their system hide personal grudges and private conflict at every level. The result is a gulf between rich and poor far more dramatic than anything we have here in Eldant.”

“Huh...”

“This led to two separate purges under the previous king, and a further one immediately after the accession of the current ruler. Many allegedly corrupt soldiers and civil servants have been executed under the banner of righting wrongs and making the system more honest.”

“.....Executed?”

That was a word I didn’t like. I frowned deeply.

“What is the matter, Shinichi?” Petralka asked, concerned by my

reaction.

"Er, uh, nothing at all..."

"Indeed?"

"It's just, y'know, even hearing the word *executed* kind of freaks me out..."

I wasn't just saying that; it was totally true. It scared the daylights out of me, the idea of repaying a crime with the ultimate punishment, death, especially when the criminal hadn't even killed anybody. I did understand that without anyone being made an example of, the corruption might spread —and that the deliberate creation of a dramatic gap between the rich and the poor could *indirectly* lead to killings. But still.

"...Ah, yes." Something seemed to occur to Petralka out of the blue, and she smiled like a kid who had just thought of a fun game. "We have heard that over the coming break, there is to be a photo-graphy party at your house, yes?"

"Huh? What does that have to do with—"

"We simply heard rumors."

It occurred to me that several of Petralka's advisors were parents of my students. It would have been simple enough for word of the get-together— or the photography seminar—to travel from students to parents, then from parents to empress. But it completely blindsided me. As did what came next...

"We shall attend as well!" Petralka declared.

"What? But you—"

"You suggest this would be a problem?"

"N-No, but..."

I had been expecting Petralka to visit our house at some point. But I never imagined it would be so soon. Amatena might be able to just stay hidden, but with Clara still not having mastered the basics of maid-ing, I had to hope she wouldn't do anything that would give her away.

"All is well, then!" Petralka was fired up about this. I glanced around and noticed that Prime Minister Zahar looked awfully tired, somehow resigned to this. I was sure he had tried to dissuade Petralka himself, but that she had overruled him. "Spare us your distraught posturing, Zahar!" Petralka slapped the arm of her throne. "We shall be properly guarded, and we shall only be at Shinichi's mansion. There will be nothing to worry about!"

“Your Majesty... I’m sure you’re quite right about that, but...”

“And we are looking forward to it,” Petralka added.

I looked at Garius, but his shoulders slumped wordlessly. Ever since the incident with Bedouna, the Assembly of Patriots, Petralka’s comings and goings from the castle had been strictly controlled. Then she had snuck away to Japan with me. I guess Garius was trying not to stress her out too much. And the photography party would be the perfect pressure-release valve. I definitely understood that, and yet...

“Hmm...”

The students, the empress, and the empress’s bodyguards. The more pairs of eyes we had around, the greater the danger that Amatena and Clara would be discovered.

I privately vowed to come up with a strategy before the next break.

No sooner had class started than I announced a change in our curriculum.

Normally during this time, we would watch a Japanese-language anime, translating as we went. The students had picked up a fair amount of Japanese by now, and could actually understand a good chunk of what they heard in simple, slice-of-life programs.

Anyway.

“Today, we’re going to talk about how to use a camera and how to take photographs,” I told the kids from my place at the lectern.

I took out my phone and held it up so everyone could see it. Before I had given any instructions, the quicker students pulled out their 3TSes and digital cameras and put them on their desks. Many of my pupils, hungry for otaku culture, took a lot of initiative.

I had decided to start with some basic tenets of photography. I wanted to make sure to teach the kids the most fundamental principles now, before it was too late. When everyone was gathered at my house for a photography slam—along with Petralka and her knights—we wouldn’t have the leisure to explain very much. And I couldn’t imagine what would happen if I turned them loose in the mansion with no instruction in the basic manners and rules of photography. Actually, I could, and it wasn’t pretty. Even Loek and Romilda had treated the photo-taking like a duel. With a dozen times

that many people, the spirit of competition seemed likely to take over completely, and the kids would probably start snapping photos indiscriminately. Whether they were of me, or Myusel, or Minori-san, or Elvia, or Hikaru-san, or Brooke, or Cerise, or any of our personal rooms... heck, maybe even of the furniture.

The photographic madness could all too easily come to include even Clara and Amatena's hidden rooms, where Bahairamanian military uniforms might be discovered.

And that would be bad. Very bad.

So the first thing I absolutely had to get the students to understand was that it was impolite to take a picture of someone, or of their possessions or their room, without asking permission.

"Taking photos is tons of fun," I began, "and I completely understand wanting a memento of a place or a moment. In fact, that's what cameras are for." Once I was sure I had the students' attention, I doused the image I had been showing on my phone's screen and put it on the lectern. "But you can't always take a picture of something just because you want to." My voice became more stern; the students looked at each other, surprised. "Think of a 'layer," I said. "Someone doing cosplay." I mentally pictured Hikaru-san. "In cosplay, you enjoy yourself by becoming someone that you want to be. Maybe a hero from a manga, or a heroine from an anime. But it would suck if you weren't in character, right? And even more if somebody had a permanent record of it. Like, imagine someone cosplaying Madoka from *Rental ☆Madoka*. No matter how tired she got, Madoka would never squat in the shadows muttering 'Bah, this is dumb,' would she?"

There was a growing chatter in the classroom.

"No 'layer wants to be photographed doing something like that. Obviously, everyone gets tired, and squatting isn't inherently a bad thing. But as someone who loves *Rental ☆Madoka*, that 'layer would only want to be photographed when they were at their very best, their very cutest, looking just like Madoka."

I could see kids around the room nodding and saying, "That makes sense..." It looked like they were starting to get the basic idea.

"Asking a 'layer for permission to take their picture is almost like asking, 'Would you please get completely in character?' And it acts like an opportunity for them to switch on their persona. That character is what both of you want out of cosplay, after all." Cosplayers wanted to completely

become the character they were portraying, while fans photographing them wanted to see that character through the 'layer. "So you can see how just snapping a picture of a cosplayer unannounced is pretty rude. It has to do with the very heart of what cosplay is."

I paused. Cosplay was a nice, simple example, an easy entrée into the subject. Now for the real challenge.

"But did you know that the same thing applies to our everyday lives?" The students looked at me, amazed. "Wouldn't it be embarrassing to be remembered forever for making a face you wish everyone would forget? Like if you were asleep, or yawning or something. Girls, picture how you look in the mirror first thing in the morning—still sleepy, haven't combed your hair. How about it? Would you want anyone and everyone to see you that way?"

The female students promptly shook their heads. The guys didn't seem as sure, but maybe that was to be expected. Incidentally, I had once bumped into my little sister Shizuki in the hallway in the state I'd just described—and she had practically punted me downstairs.

I went on: "And if you deliberately hide the fact that you're taking a photo from the other person, that's called *kakushi-tori*, a sneak shot, and it's actually a crime in Japan. Think about it: not only would there be some unflattering picture of you, but you wouldn't even know it. Scary, huh?"

The kids looked at each other again. *Hmm.* They seemed to be having trouble imagining what that would be like. Okay, then.

I clenched my fist and proclaimed, "Would you want a picture of the person inside a mascot costume? Would you want to see the zipper on the back of Ultra**n's suit?!" No one would be happy to see such dream-shattering, illusion-wrecking things! It would be tragic! My argument was that one must avoid arbitrarily taking photos so as not to produce such despair-inducing images! "There is no one inside!"

Go***lla, Ga**ra, Gaba**n, and all the others—they were all real, live creatures and were all our friends—no, more to the point, there was no one inside any of them! Let there be no child weeping piteously at the creepiness of a bunch of folded-up *kaiju* suits because someone somewhere sneaked into a warehouse and grabbed a few pictures!

...Seriously though, that would be traumatic. Scary stuff.

I suddenly realized the students were completely cowed by my ever more impassioned speech. I cleared my throat, hoping to get back to my

subject. “Uh, that being the case, just make sure you ask before you take a picture. You’re welcome to come to my house, but you need to remember that rule.”

That was it. There was a moment of silence, and then:

“Yes, Senseiiii!” The kids all nodded obediently.

While Shinichi-sama and the others were at school, Clara-san and I did the laundry and cleaning. Clara-san was capable and a quick learner, and I had very little to teach her in terms of practical basics. At most, I sometimes gave her tips on the best ways to get work done efficiently in this particular household. For example, the best order in which to clean the rooms to finish quickly. Whose laundry to do first, and whose to do last, such that the wash water would stay clean the longest. Things like that. (If you are wondering, when it came to clothing, Elvia-san’s tended to be dirtiest, so we saved her laundry for last.)

Finally...

“Let’s take a short break in the living room.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We were walking along hauling the bucket of dirty wash water. We put the cleaning supplies in the storage shed, wiped our hands, and went to the living room. No one else was there. Cerise-san and Brooke-san must have been off doing other work.

I had Clara-san wait in the living room, while I went to the kitchen and got two teacups. They weren’t fancy cups like I would use to serve Shinichi-sama and the others, and the tea we drank was just cheap stuff, but with a spoonful of honey it was still an excellent antidote to our fatigue.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you very much.”

We each sat on a sofa, with the table between us.

“Are you feeling tired?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” Clara-san said.

“I see.”

“Yes.”

There, our conversation broke off. When we were working together, there was little need to speak, which made things easier, but the silences

could be somewhat uncomfortable when we were resting like this. I searched my mind for something to talk about.

To my surprise, it was Clara-san who spoke first. “Myusel-san.”

“Wha? Er, yes?”

Maybe she found the silence as unpleasant as I did. She didn’t look like it, but then, she hardly showed any emotions...

“What will we do next?”

“Let’s see. Around the time the master gets home, we’ll start working on dinner. I’ll have you handling the same things as yesterday. Oh, but today we’ll use deatufos. You’ll need to slice them finely and make sure they’re well cooked.”

“You don’t use them raw?” Clara-san asked, tilting her head.

Yes, it was common to eat deatufos raw, and I heard it was quite tasty. Deatufos, by the way, were apparently similar to what, according to Shinichi-sama, the Ja-panese called a “tomato.”

“That’s right. Shinichi-sama doesn’t seem to cope well with the texture of raw deatufos, and it’s hard to get him to eat them. But he enjoys them if they’re thoroughly cooked.”

When I pictured Shinichi-sama eating my food and pronouncing it delicious—well, my cheeks flushed at the very thought. To be fair, he praised most of my cooking, but there also seemed to be specific ingredients and flavors he was less fond of, so that certain things he would eat more slowly, or in a specific order. I took careful note of these and made minor adjustments to the menu. All so that Shinichi-sama would be even happier.

“Understood,” Clara-san said with a brief nod. “If that is what will make Shinichi-sama happy.”

I didn’t answer, but a thought flashed through my mind. All day yesterday, Clara-san had been asking me if each thing we did would make Shinichi-sama happy. Of course, it was essential that a maid wish to please her master. But strictly speaking, in this household we served more than just Shinichi-sama. There was Hikaru-sama, and the young men’s bodyguard Minori-sama, as well. Yes, we all sat down together for meals, but the truth was that Brooke-san, Cerise-san, and even Elvia-san were effectively servants, so as maids our primary duty was to the three masters of the house. Yet Clara-san asked only about Shinichi-sama. Why? I wondered.

“Er—ahem, Clara-san?”

“Yes?”

“Clara-san, when it comes to Shinichi-sama, do you...”

Thoughts of my journey to Bahairam flitted through my head. When we had all parted ways, Clara-san had planted a kiss on Shinichi-sama’s cheek. I kept telling myself it had only been a gesture of farewell, and Shinichi-sama had said the same thing, but...

“Do you... respect him very deeply... or... should I say...” Once the doubt crept in, I couldn’t get rid of it. “As a man... as a member of the opposite sex... do you feel any affection for...”

“Yes.”

My stumbling, confused words were met with a single, definitive answer from Clara-san. My chest ached.

Of course, it was the right of anyone who knew Shinichi-sama to feel any way about him that they pleased. And Shinichi-sama could feel how he wished about anyone else. I was only one of his helpers, and it was joyful enough for me simply to serve at his side—or it should have been. But...

“Shinichi-sama is the person I love second-most in the world.”

“Wha...? S-Second-most, did you say?”

“The first is my elder sister, Amatena Harneiman-sama,” Clara-san answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Oh, uh, I—I see.”

I had no other answer. But Amatena-san was a woman. In that case, could Clara-san be talking not about romantic love, but about affection and respect for someone as a person? Or...

“I think the question stands for you.”

“What?”

“You asked me, but how do *you* feel?”

“W-Well, I...!”

I was lost for an answer. I didn’t even know for sure what kind of like or dislike Clara-san was asking about. Considering Shinichi-sama as a person, of course I didn’t dislike him. He was my master, and on top of that, he was smart, and very kind. I had no reason at all to be unhappy with him. I wanted to see his smile. I wanted to be near to him. With my whole heart, I served Shinichi-sama so that he would be happy.

Was that feeling simple respect, or...?

“Shinichi-sama,” Clara-san said as if something had just occurred to her. “He said there was someone he had set his heart on.”

“.....Wha...?” It took me a moment even to process what she had said. Then my vision suddenly got dark, like I wasn’t getting enough blood to my head.

Someone he has his heart set on.

Meaning, someone Shinichi-sama hoped to have as his partner. Who... Who could it be? Minori-sama? Elvia-san? Or perhaps Her Majesty...?

Could it possibly be Minister Cordobal? (I highly doubted it.)

As my heart shattered into pieces, the names flashed through my mind. Until—

“I believe he may have been talking about you.”

“What? About me, what...?”

“The one in his heart.”

“But that can’t... I’m not...”

“To judge from what I have seen so far, though, perhaps I was wrong. It seems the two of you have not so much as ‘held hands’ yet.”

“H-H-Held hands...”

I was not so naïve as to miss that she was implying much more than she said. And she was right: what she was implying had never once taken place between Shinichi-sama and me. But then...

“Come to think of it, he did say something about being sick,” Clara-san said, cocking her head.

Sick? Shinichi-sama?

“What do you mean, sick?”

“It seems that if his body becomes entangled with that of a woman, he will die.”

“What?! Really?! Is there such an illness?”

“I hear it is quite uncommon.”

“Oh no...”

It was the first time I had heard anything about this. I felt myself growing more and more dizzy at my own fecklessness. I was aware that since Shinichi-sama’s arrival here, I had served him longer and more closely than anyone. I should have known him better than anyone else in the Holy Eldant Empire. And yet somehow, I had been completely unaware that he suffered from this life-threatening condition; somehow, I had never noticed it.

Perhaps this sickness was unique to Ja-pan. Maybe I could ask Minori-sama or Hikaru-sama about it later. I wondered if there were certain foods

you shouldn’t eat because of this illness...

“Shinichi-sama...”

Somehow, the whole thing left me indescribably sad. I stood there biting my nails as some emotion flooded up from inside me. I couldn’t say what it was; I could only try to endure.

We all ate dinner together, as had been the custom in this mansion ever since I had suggested it. No one was forced to be there, of course. There were times when people just had work to do, or ate dinner on their own for some other pressing reason—but that was the exception. Eating together was the rule, at least in our house. Everyone shared the same table, regardless of position or social status.

And that included Amatena and Clara. We rarely had visitors around dinner time, and it was dark out, so they could make a quick escape through the shadows to their little shack if they needed to—at least, that was the gamble I was making.

So we found ourselves at the dinner table, with two more people than usual...

“Myusel...?” I asked, noticing that something looked a little off with her. She seemed to be letting out small sighs periodically, and she kept pausing at her meal. “You’re not eating much. Are you feeling okay?”

She didn’t answer.

“Myusel?” I said, a little louder, and this time she flinched in surprise.

“Er... wha? Oh, yes!” I guess she must have been deep in thought, and not heard me. “I’m very sorry, what is it?”

“I was just thinking, you haven’t eaten much. I was wondering if you were feeling poorly.”

“Oh, no, not at all.” She smiled, or at least tried to. It looked a little awkward—it was obvious she was forcing herself. If she didn’t want to talk about it, though, then I didn’t want to pry.

“Yeah? Okay, but if you’re ever feeling bad, just say so, all right?”

“Y-Yes, of course. Thank you...”

I nodded, and Myusel resumed eating.

When I thought about it, I realized that having Amatena and Clara here meant an increase in Myusel’s workload—more food to make, more

laundry to do. Yes, she had Clara to help her, but she had to teach her as they went, so maybe it was still more work for her in the long run. Myusel was the type to put her head down and push through her work rather than ever complain about it; as master of the house, I would have to be the one to notice if she was overstressed.

So I asked, “How about you, Clara? Getting used to the job?”

The maid-uniformed Clara looked up. “Yes. I sliced and prepared the deatufos you’re eating.”

I looked at the red-colored food on my plate. It was a vegetable very similar to a tomato, and I didn’t much care for the texture when it was raw. But when sliced and grilled, the texture changed to something I enjoyed, or could at least tolerate. The taste was pretty good in any case.

“Really? Cool.”

So she was starting to get into the swing of the maid thing. She still wasn’t exactly overflowing with warmth or, like, facial expressions or anything. I didn’t expect that to change overnight. I looked at our other stolid soldier.

“What do you think, Amatena? Going to be able to imitate Elvia?”

“Do I have a choice?” Amatena answered darkly.

Oookay. Maybe it wasn’t going so well for her.

Drowning out Amatena’s noncommittal response was Elvia, pursing her lips. “Big Sis Ama is totally hopeless!” She almost sounded pleased about it.

“Elvia.”

The younger girl wilted under her sister’s glare.

“It’s only natural when you’ve got two such different personalities,” I said with a wry smile.

Given how similar Elvia and Amatena looked, I thought we might just be able to make this work if we could get their facial expressions and modes of speech to line up just a little more—but that was turning out to be the most difficult thing of all.

“We just have to be careful, since Petralka and all the students are coming to the mansion on the next break...” That put me in mind of what I’d heard from Garius that morning. “Come to think of it, they mentioned Bahairam at the castle today. It sounds like there really is a major purge going on over there.”

Amatena nodded but said nothing. I guess she wasn’t impressed; we

were just saying what she already knew.

"But he mentioned..." I went on, "he said this sort of thing has happened a lot in Bahairam. Amatena, you've only been releasing our imports on a trial basis, right? You're not making a bunch of money from them or anything?"

"Hardly," Amatena said. "Personal profit is the last thing on my mind in cooperating with you, Shinichi. The 'otaku' items we've brought in haven't caused us any particular trouble so far—our missions do officially send us into Eldant, and we simply pass them off as matériel collected on the ground."

In other words, a handful of our otaku goods wasn't going to be enough to get them arrested.

"But we were not, of course, given orders to collect such things. As such, possession of even one of them could in principle be the basis for an arrest."

"Ah..."

I understood, somehow. No serious harm seemed to be coming from them, so the "imports" were mostly overlooked, but strictly speaking, they were contraband, and if somebody made a fuss about them, Amatena could get in trouble. Compare it to secondary works like doujinshi in our world.

"But in that case," Hikaru-san broke in, "why would they make *you* the scapegoat, Amatena?"

"Hm. That's—well, it's a good question."

Amatena was hardly the only person from Bahairam who had infiltrated Eldant territory. She probably wasn't the only one who had brought back otaku goods—not by a long shot. To purge every single person who had done so probably wasn't realistic. If you weren't careful, you could end up booting out half the armed forces from the border area.

Doujinshi were sometimes handled the same way: an unhappy creator might make an example of one particular work. If you threw the book at one person, it was a warning to hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of others who were doing the same thing: *"If you cross this line, this is what you get, see? Watch yourselves."*

"I don't know." Amatena shook her head. "To be frank... without Clara's warning, I might not have noticed until they were slapping the cuffs on me."

"Hmm?" That was odd.

“Just a thought,” Hikaru-san said with a probing look. “But I think you’d agree you tend to look a little stern, right, Amatena? That you aren’t very open or approachable? And let me guess—were you the same way back in the Bahairamanian military? I mean with your superiors and fellow soldiers?”

“Yes, I am and I was. No matter whom you’re talking to, whom you’re dealing with, you must not show weakness. The army isn’t precisely cutthroat, but there’s no end of people who won’t hesitate to step on others’ toes on the way up.”

“Knew it,” Hikaru-san said with an elaborate shrug.

“Knew what?” Amatena asked, squinting at him.

“That’s your problem. It’s only natural to want to get rid of people who you can’t tell what they’re thinking.”

“Hey—Hikaru-san...?!” I said, appalled at his bluntness.

Amatena, though, seemed to be thinking deeply about something. The silence lasted for a long moment before she said, almost in a whisper, “As it happens, Shinichi said much the same thing.”

“Huh? I did?”

“That refusing to show vulnerability ends up looking like hostility.”

“Oh...” I guess I had said something like that.

“Happens a lot in otaku clubs,” Hikaru-san said with a nonchalant gesture.

Otaku clubs... I was an otaku, but I had never been involved in a formal organization like that, and didn’t know much about how they worked.

“You know what they say: get even three people together and the infighting starts.”

“Is that how it goes?” I said.

“Sure is,” Hikaru-san said with a confident nod.

I gathered that cosplayers often formed groups based on people portraying characters from particular series or the like, and you would obviously get to know the people in those groups. It had to be more fun to shoot the breeze with your friends while you cosplayed than to do it alone. What if all of you were having a grand old time and just one person was sitting there, silent and unreadable. Maybe you would start to wonder: *Do we really need her?*

I wasn’t sure how I felt about putting otaku clubs and the military in basically the same category. But from the simple perspective of human

interactions with other people...

Amatena looked down at her hands, silent, as if trying to think of something. Clara watched from her right side, and Elvia from her left, both of them clearly feeling sorry for her.

I thought I heard a sound in the dark. I opened my eyes, but I felt sluggish; I couldn't work up the will to move my body. I felt like I was floating on a warm sea, still half sunk in a dream.

Above me I could see the ceiling of my room—or rather, the canopy of my bed. The moonlight that came in through the window kept the darkness from being total, but the chill in the air and the occasional cries of insects let me know that it was smack in the middle of the night. Still too early to get up. I closed my eyes again.

With my vision gone, I suddenly became uncomfortably aware of my body. Everything felt heavy, as if something were sitting on top of me. And the weight was slowly *moving*, from my feet upwards...

"Hmf...?"

Was there actually something on top of me? The Sandman kept beckoning to me, but I couldn't ignore the weird feeling, and opened my eyes again. At which point...

"C-Clara?!"

The blanket that normally covered me was missing. Instead, there was Clara, mounted on my midriff. What's more, she wasn't wearing her maid uniform, but some shreds of cloth that barely covered her chest and private areas... Basically, no, I mean literally, underwear.

"Um... May I respectfully ask what it is you mean to be doing?" I slipped into *keigo* from being totally overwhelmed.

Clara's eyes glinted in the dark (that's a beast person for you), and unlike me, she sounded completely calm as she said, "This is also part of a maid's duty."

"In some R-18 game or something, maybe!" I shouted without meaning to.

When had this happened?! When had she gotten into my room?! I was sure I had locked the door... Wait, but maybe it hadn't been closed all the way? Or maybe she had taken Myusel's master key? The questions flooded

my mind, but this wasn't the time.

"Shinichi-sama..."

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I got a better look at Clara's slender, bare legs. They were practically picture-perfect: not too slim, not too large, the lines of them so beautiful you could sigh, as if at a painting. And not only that, but I could feel her body heat through my pajamas. My heart was going full throttle, even though I wished it would slow down.

"C... Clara...?" I looked back at her face. The little flash of red that I saw—was at her tongue? The way it ran over her lips as she sat over me made me think of a predator hunting its prey. Come to think of it... she *was* a tiger.

"Shinichi-sama..." she repeated, and then with a sinuous motion, she slid down until she was lying on top of me.

"H-Heeeek?!

Nrrrgghhhh?!

Any desire to sleep was banished somewhere far over the horizon of cause and effect.

"Shinichi-sama..." Her lips were inches from my ear now, and I could feel her quickening breath along with her sweet, husky voice. Distantly, it occurred to me that her body seemed warmer than you would expect. Did she have a fever? ...No, was this excitement?

"Oh, no..." I recognized the state she was in. This was—that thing. The "phase of the moon" beast people got. When they went into heat each month..... "Clara, hold on a second! Just calm d—!"

I never got to finish trying to talk her down. She grabbed my pajama shirt with both hands and tore it open. She might have been small, but she was still half beast—it was no problem for her at all.

"Hyaaaagghhh!" I let out a genuine scream. Clara, though, hardly seemed to notice as she brought her face down to my now-bare chest. First I felt the softness of her cheek. Then something sort of warm and moist, carrying her heat... That had to be her lips—no, wait, her tongue?!

"Clara, stop, that tickles—!"

I got goosebumps all over as the movement of her tongue brought me to the border between ticklishness and some other sensation. Elvia had done something similar, but Clara's tongue felt different, maybe because she was more of a cat. Wait, was this the time for such a cold, clinical assessment of their differences...?!

“Clara, no! You can’t! You can’t—”

My squeaking protestations made no impression on Clara.

“Clara!” a sharp voice said. The were-tiger froze. At the same time, a light entered the room; not the moonlight, but probably from the sprite lamp by the door. If you gave it a gentle tap, the sprites inside would light up in surprise.

Obviously, the sharp voice wasn’t mine. But I did recognize it...

“Amatena...” I said, turning toward the voice.

Had the door been left open, or just not shut properly? I didn’t know, but now Amatena was standing there.

“H-Honored sister...” Clara looked up, her face going stiff as Amatena approached with long strides. Her usual impassivity was completely gone. Then again, I guess it had been ever since she got on top of me.

“N-No... This isn’t...” Clara shook her head emphatically. Clara was willing to declare anytime, anywhere, her undying love for her honored older sister, so for that very person to see her in the situation... maybe she felt like a girl whose boyfriend had walked in on her with another man. Er, then again, I guess they were both girls, and back when I had been a prisoner in Bahairam, Clara had done stuff like this with me on Amatena’s actual orders. So maybe it wasn’t a good comparison.

“This... I...”

“Get off of Shinichi.” Amatena grabbed the sputtering Clara by the wrist and pulled her none too gently off the bed. She didn’t resist. Then she stood Clara in front of her, narrowing her eyes. “It’s that day, isn’t it? I know.”

“Older sister... I am so sorry.” Clara looked at the ground.

Amatena took this in, then turned to me. “I apologize for the trouble Clara caused you.”

“Oh, n-no, I... I understand it... just happens...”

I mean, some people would have said there was nothing to apologize for.

“It’s pathetic. As a soldier in the Bahairamanian military, it’s shameful,” Amatena said.

“Huh?” Her reaction wasn’t quite what I expected. Okay, she wasn’t thrilled, but there didn’t seem to be a trace of jealousy there from discovering her “little sister” rubbing herself all over some other person. She said it was shameful for a soldier—but what did that mean?

“To assault a man out of an excess of desire—it’s proof that she lacks self-control. And a soldier without control is less use than a wagon without its wheels. Beast people already have enough trouble rising in the ranks because of a perception that they can’t keep themselves in check.”

“Ah.....”

So that was what was going on. All the Bahairamanians I knew were beast people, so I had started to feel like they represented the country’s entire population. But when I really thought about it, I knew that humans were the majority group all over this world, not just in Eldant. I was sure there were plenty of them in Bahairam, too. Even the Father-Ruler had been a human. (Come to think of it, I even remembered Elvia asking if she didn’t disgust me...)

I had to suspect that human supremacy was the status quo for most of this world. Bahairam could crow all it wanted about everyone being equal under the Father-Ruler, but there was sure to be some discrimination, at least in the form of physical and spiritual differences among races. It would make sense if it was hard for beast people to get ahead in a human-dominated world. And it wasn’t difficult to imagine humans saying things like “beast people have no self-control” as a way of justifying that.

That was why, in order to achieve and maintain a certain position in the military, people like Amatena and Clara had to show restraint, self-control, to convince those around them that they were “safe.” But having to repress their emotions, not let them show—that meant looking more emotionless, sounding more stiff, and after years and years of that, it had become their default attitude.

Who knew? Maybe there was a sense that being able to restrain your biological impulses, your “phase of the moon,” was what made you an adult. But was it just my history as a wimpy home security guard, or did that seem like a huge amount of physical work?

Clara turned to me and said contritely, “I forgot about your illness... I’m sorry.”

“My illness...?” I repeated, but I quickly realized she must have been referring to my little lie back in Bahairam. To keep her from just overpowering me, I had told her that doing naughty stuff with a girl would kill me. She didn’t seriously still believe that, did she?

But it didn’t end there.

“What? You’re ill, Shinichi?” Amatena looked at me seriously.

“Oh, well, uh...” I wasn’t sure what to say. Confessing that it had all been a lie didn’t sound very pleasant at the moment. Maybe there was some way to change the subject. “M-More importantly...” I wracked my brain for another topic, any topic. “This, uh, happens to all beast people, not just Elvia, huh?”

“Yes. It is an unfortunate fact of life.”

“Huh, I see.” Phew. Topic change: successful. So this really was something all beast people had to deal with. But in that case... “Is it something you go through too, Amatena?”

I meant the question innocently, but the reaction was one I never expected. Amatena blushed beet red, I assumed from embarrassment. “Do *not* ask!”

“Y-Yes ma’am! I’m sorry!”

Her shout was so fierce that it had me seated formally on my bed, apologizing. *Argh. Well, she did say how embarrassing it was. What was I thinking, asking a question like that? If this were Japan, she could probably sue me for sexual harassment.*

Just as I was sweating this out...

“Shinichi-sama?!” Footsteps came pounding down the hallway. “Did something happen?!”

Myusel and Elvia appeared in the room, with Minori-san a few steps behind them. I guess they had been drawn by my shouting, eventually. Saved! Or so I thought...

“...Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san said, narrowing her eyes at me behind her glasses. The other two newcomers just stared. “What exactly are you doing?”

“‘What’? I’m...”

And then it dawned on me how this must look. Me seated formally on top of the bed, with my pajamas torn open. Amatena in front of me in her underwear, and Clara half naked to boot.

“Don’t tell me you invited Clara to your room for a little—”

“No, I didn’t!” I exclaimed, withering under Minori-san’s stare. She (and, I could only imagine, Myusel and Elvia) seemed to think that I had tried to have a little midnight assignation with Clara, only to be discovered by Amatena. “Do you really think I’m the kind of guy who would do that?!”

“I guess not. I know you don’t have the guts.” Minori-san’s words were

as blunt as a slap in the face.

"...Uh, I've got to say, that hurts." I was glad the misunderstanding had been cleared up, yet the fact that it hinged on being acknowledged as a gutless wonder was something of a tragedy in itself. But just then...

"That's no *fair*!" Elvia exclaimed. She seemed angry for some reason. "After I've been holding back all this time?! So why'd the two of you get to have relations with Shinichi-sama first?"

"Can you not talk about *relations*?!" I could hardly keep up with the quips necessary here.

"Hold on... You two, is this about that day...?" Minori-san said, taking a step closer to me. It sounded like she was finally starting to grasp the situation.

"That's right," I said. I was innocent! I hadn't done anything! I was the victim here... But then something caught my attention. "Huh?"

You two?

"I wish you wouldn't be so selfish, Big Sis Ama!" Elvia exclaimed meanwhile.

"I have not done anything yet."

"*Yet*, you say! *Yet*!"

"I am a proud soldier of the Bahairamanian military! To suggest that I would be overcome by a mere phase of the moon—"

"Myusel I could understand, but I won't have my thunder stolen by you, Sis!"

"U-Um, Elvia-san...?" (That was Myusel; Elvia's last remark had left her somewhat befuddled. But anyway...)

"Today is *Clara's* phase," I said, trying to break up the sisters' argument before things went completely off the rails. Amatena was only here to rescue me from Clara, who had succumbed to the impulse of her phase of the moon..... right?

"Huh?" Elvia said, turning to me with a look of astonishment. "But I was sure Big Sis Ama's day was right around now. That's why I thought—"

Whack...!

The hits just kept on coming with Elvia. Who then literally got hit when Amatena smacked her in the back of the head. Yikes. That looked painful...

"Eeyowch! Wh-What the heck, Sis..." Elvia demanded piteously, crouching back.

“Keep your mouth shut!” Amatena said, red-faced.

Seeing Amatena embarrassed like that... It was a fresh, sweet side of her. Although I knew I was asking for a smacking myself if I said that out loud.

“And? Did your chastity come through intact, Shinichi-kun?”

“Please don’t talk about my chastity,” I groaned, flopping back onto my bed.

Meanwhile...

“Well, y’ didn’t have to hit me, Big Sis Ama!”

“Quiet!”

“It’s all because you were gonna attack Shinichi-sama...”

“I told you, that’s not true!”

As the beast girls argued in the background, I let out something that was half-yawn, half-sigh.

Chapter Three: Is a Quiet Life Too Much to Ask?

And so, break finally rolled around. Which is to say, the day I had promised to let the students take photos at the mansion.

"Sensei! What do you think?"

"Look at mine, too!"

Students were swarming the yard, digital cameras and 3TSes in hand. They looked like they were having a great time. In the end, virtually the entire class managed to show up with some form of photographic equipment. The ones who had gotten digital cameras lent their 3TSes to the ones who hadn't, so everyone could feel involved.

With that many kids taking pictures, you can imagine how many pictures got taken. But it was nothing that wouldn't have happened at any other photography get-together.

As far as it went, anyway.

"Okay, look this way!"

"Say cheese!"

"Zero wouldn't pose like that!"

But it wasn't just any photography get-together that was happening in our yard. Everyone was dressed up in ways that looked very familiar—specifically, from manga and anime and games.

That's right: this was a cosplay affair. Both the photographers and the photographees were dressed up. Most of the outfits had been prepared by Minori-san and Hikaru-san. The two of them had suggested the idea out of the blue, apparently concerned that the party wouldn't be interesting enough on its own. Some kids had even asked their parents to get clothes made by local tailors.

I had to admit, though, that we had other objectives in mind for this cosplay photo party. One goal was that the kids would understand what it meant to be on the receiving end of a photograph. When they were dressed up themselves, it would help them get a sense of why they might not want

someone to take a picture without their permission. That was Hikaru-san's idea.

The other hope was articulated by Minori-san: namely, that a cosplay party would keep them busy enough that we wouldn't have students wandering at random through every room and hallway in the mansion. Clara was one thing, but if Amatena was discovered, it wouldn't be pretty. If we limited the students' access in the house to rooms with outlets, and maybe to my and Hikaru-san's rooms, it would keep the chance of Amatena being photographed to a minimum.

So anyway, there we were. Most of the students were immediately taken with the cosplay costumes provided by Minori-san and Hikaru-san and quickly picked out their favorites. Our two fashionistas used safety pins and clips to get the sizes right—and before you knew it, our lawn looked like the world's biggest crossover fic.

"Perfect, just like that! Look into the distance!" The instructions were coming from someone with her own DSLR camera—Minori-san, out there among the students. "Okay, here we go—three, two, one. Cheese!"

The shutter clicked away as she shot from head-on, above, below. She was so confident, I wanted to ask where the professional cameraman had come from. Even the way she took the pictures was, like... sexy, somehow. The flattering patter she kept up. I wouldn't have been completely surprised to hear her exclaim, "Great, now get that top off!" or, "Take it all off, just go for it!"

She was already lined up alongside the guys, taking photos. And then there was...

"Yes! Hold that pose!" Hikaru-san had set up camp in the shade and was fiddling with some kind of machine. It was a small box, and sat at his feet puffing out smoke. A smoke machine or a fog machine, I guessed. Come to think of it, I had heard it was fashionable these days to use one of those to spice up a cosplay shoot. And it did lend the characters a certain mystique. Gothic-Loli and "hard-boiled" types looked just perfect brooding in the fog.

"Hmm..." I sat in a chair in a corner of the yard, watching everyone pose and snap pictures of each other. Hikaru-san was much better suited to being the teacher in this situation; I planned to help run the electrical outlets and generally do behind-the-scenes work. But then...

"Shinichi!" I turned in the direction of my name to find an

unmistakable figure coming toward me with a smile. It was Petralka. And she was in full costume. “Do you like it?!”

She had her digital camera in one hand and was giving me a full-fledged grin. She stopped in front of me and spun around, her silver hair and Gothic-Loli skirt billowing out.

Whoa. Cute...!

“Does it look good?”

“Yeah, terrific,” I said. “Is this...?” I recognized almost immediately what her outfit was. How could I not? She was Angelica, the heroine of *Angelica—The Burdened Princess*. The long silver hair and thick eyebrows, the butterfly-themed hair clips, the predominantly black-and-white outfit. Well, all that was common enough. What was less common was the box on her back, bigger than Petralka herself, and the even larger sniper rifle she was carrying.

Incidentally, the books never made clear exactly what was in that box. One explanation even claimed it was home to a mysterious life form of some sort.

“It was Hikaru’s suggestion,” Petralka said with a smile. “It is, after all, a work penned by your father, is it not, Shinichi?”

“Er... yeah. Well, yeah.” I nodded and half-smiled.

It was true; my father had written the light novel. It was apparently one of his more popular series, and there were even plans for an anime.

“That’s really something, though,” I said.

“Hm?”

“I mean... You *really* look like her. You’ve already got the silver hair, so you don’t even need a wig, and you’ve really nailed all the details. It’s like you’ve transcended cosplay.”

Granted, Petralka was an empress, whereas Angelica was technically a princess. But Angelica was supposed to be on the small side, so Petralka fit her that way, too. The only noticeable difference was that their eye colors didn’t match, but the costume itself was so arresting that your hey-that’s-not-quite-right sense took a vacation. As for Angelica’s distinctive thick eyebrows, Petralka must have gotten help with makeup from Minori-san or Hikaru-san.

Hmm. Petralka as Angelica. It was so perfect, I wished my dad could see it.

“If you say so, Shinichi, then we assume it is true.” Petralka put her

hands on her hips and nodded in satisfaction. Behind her, I could see several female knights. Her bodyguards, presumably, along just on the off chance anything happened.

"The box isn't too heavy?" I asked. I assumed it was made of packing foam or something; I was sure it was empty.

"It's quite light. Look." Petralka spun another half-turn, as if to emphasize just how easily she could move.

"Eek!"

But as she turned, the box caught someone passing by.

"Hrk—our apologies," she said politely, turning to the person she had knocked over. It was Myusel. "Are you quite all right, Myusel?"

"Y-Yes, thank you. It was just a gentle tap... I'm the one who should apologize." She took a proffered hand and stood up.

"Hrm?" Petralka blinked. She was looking—not at Myusel, but at the other maid, who had offered Myusel her hand. It looked like they were just on their way back to the kitchen to get tea and snacks for everybody. "This would be...?"

"Oh, that's the girl we mentioned." Inside, I was terrified, but I forced myself to act calm. "Myusel's distant relation, the one who's staying with us to learn to become a maid? Her name is Clara." We had settled on using Clara's real name so she would react immediately when someone called to her.

"A pleasure to meet you." The new maid bowed her head to Petralka, virtually expressionless.

"So she's the one..." Petralka eyed Clara up and down. My heart was pounding in my chest every moment she spent looking at our "new maid." Could she possibly see the beast ears hidden by the headdress? Were the elf ears too obviously fake? Myusel seemed to be having the same thoughts; I could see her watching Petralka uneasily.

"Can't say she looks much like Myusel," Petralka murmured.

"W-Well, she's a *distant* relation. They won't look that much alike."

"Is she also a half-elf?"

"N-No. She... She's from my mother's side, so..." Myusel answered awkwardly.

It couldn't be easy for her to lie to Petralka. We had agreed that our story would be that Clara was Myusel's relative on her mother's side, but to help keep Myusel from getting in trouble if we should be discovered, we

had also claimed that Myusel herself had never met Clara before. Considering how long it had been since Myusel had had any contact with her mother's side of the family, it was plausible. But if Clara was ever found out, I was prepared to swear that I had been tricking Myusel, too.

"Hmm..."

Could Petralka tell how anxious we were? Whether she could or not, she kept up her study of Clara. The beast girl remained expressionless, but I thought she looked even stiffer than usual, so maybe she was anxious, too. To be fair, Petralka was technically the leader of an enemy nation from Clara's point of view, not someone she would normally get such a close look at.

"Clara, was that your name?" Petralka asked suddenly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Shinichi is a most perverted man. Be careful."

"H-How can you say that?!" I exclaimed, frazzled; Petralka looked at me and laughed.

It didn't look like she had seen through Clara's disguise. In fact, Petralka had her hands on her hips and was looking at me in what seemed to be high spirits. "Considering your predilections, Shinichi, we thought perhaps you had chosen your maid based on bust size again."

"You're just imagining that, Your Majesty..."

Sure I like big boobs, but I'm a huge fan of small racks, too! Wait—how long is she going to keep going back to that, anyway?!

"We are relieved to know that not *everyone* around you is necessarily well-endowed."

I gathered that Petralka felt a certain kinship with Clara when she discovered that they had the same body type—by which I mean that they were both pretty flat. I guessed that made a certain kind of sense: back in Bahairam, Clara had been chosen to take care of me on the basis that she looked young, like Petralka. Over there, they thought I was Petralka's official concubine.

"Hmm, so a large bust is not an absolute precondition for you, Shinichi?"

"I've been telling you. I'm perfectly happy with boobs of any size."

"Indeed, indeed." Petralka nodded, pleased. Was she happy to have found someone to be Flat Friends with? "More importantly, Shinichi, are you enjoying yourself?!"

“Sure I am. Heck, this photography party was my idea. What about you, Petralka?”

“We are thoroughly enjoying ourselves!” Petralka made an expansive gesture with her hands, one of which was still holding the digital camera.

As we had discovered when shooting the movie, cosplay seemed like a good stress relief valve for Petralka, a chance to be someone else. It helped her escape, just for a short while, the pressures of being a young empress. If it could do that, then this cosplay-photo party was taking care of two birds with one stone. In fact, make that three.

Petralka glanced at a student walking by. “Hm, is that costume not from *Rose Princess*?” she asked excitedly.

She was looking at someone who was indeed dressed like a character from the anime *Rose Princess*. Come to think of it, back when Hikaru-san had first showed up, Petralka had been excited about his costume, which was from the same show. I guess she really liked *Rose Princess*.

“You there!” she exclaimed. “Allow us to photograph you, please! Shinichi, we will see you later!” she added, then she rushed off, eyes shining, after her potential photographic subject. Her bodyguards hurriedly chased after her.

I guess Petralka was enjoying the party just as much as she said.

“I’m so glad Petralka seems to be having fun,” I said, turning to Myusel. And then I added, “You okay?” She still looked deeply worried. It couldn’t have been easy for her to lie to Petralka.

“...Yes, somehow...”

“I’m sorry. I know this isn’t easy...”

“No...” Myusel forced a smile onto her face.

Hmm. It looked like we had the empress fooled so far, but I didn’t expect to be able to keep this up forever. Was there any way I could talk to Petralka about exactly what was going on, and somehow get her to spare Amatena’s and Clara’s lives?

“Are you having fun, Clara?” I asked, hoping to diffuse the situation just a little.

“This is the first time I’ve been present at such an event... I feel a little lost,” Clara said, almost in a whisper.

When I really thought about it, I realized that while Clara might have picked up a little bit about anime and manga from handling the otaku goods I sent with Amatena, she couldn’t know that much about them. To go from

there to being thrown into a cosplay party must have been pretty disorienting, like an average guy-off-the-street who stumbled into Comiket.

"Hard to enjoy it, huh?"

"No, that is not the case," Clara said confidently.

"That's good to hear." For better or for worse, she never showed much expression, so I had to trust that what she said was the truth. "I know this is rough on you, Myusel, but just try to roll with it for today."

"Oh, uh, th—the photo-graphy party itself is very pleasant," she said, sounding slightly frantic. "Everyone is wearing the most wonderful costumes and having such a good time... I'm having fun just watching them."

"Hey," I said suddenly, "what about you, Myusel? Do you want a costume?"

"O-Oh, no, I... I couldn't possibly..."

Maybe she was reluctant to mingle with the students, all of whom came from nobility or wealth.

"You absolutely could!"

"Eep?!" Myusel squeaked at the sudden interjection. "Hikaru-sama..."

I turned and saw Hikaru-san standing there, grinning. "Cute girls should wear cute costumes," he said. "I mean, so should guys, but *especially* girls."

"It sounds downright convincing coming from you, Hikaru-san."

"Hush your mouth," he said with a glare at me.

Gee, uh, I thought it was a compliment.

"The point is, we've gone to all this trouble to put on a party, and you simply *must* join us."

"Huh? What? Er..."

"Here, change into this. Quickly, now."

Myusel, cowed by the force of Hikaru-san's personality, took the costume from him. It was a dress in a very light shade of red. "What's this?" she asked.

"It's the costume Viktorika wears in *Angelica—The Burdened Princess*. And here, Clara, this is for you."

"Me, too?" She blinked at the dress and wig Hikaru-san pushed into her hands.

"You're Red Angelica, Clara-san. I'll handle your makeup and Minori-san will do the photos, so hurry up and change."

“Huh? What...?”

“Even Elvia’s out there getting her cosplay on. You should jump in, have fun.” Hikaru-san pointed, directing our attention to Elvia, who was dressed in costume and mingling with the students.

Now, as I saw her out there, I understood. With her costume and her ponytailed wig, she was obviously Akane, the ninja from *Angelica*. Right now she was posing with Petralka as Minori-san took a flurry of photos.

“It’s like a cast reunion for *Angelica*!” Hikaru-san said with a big grin. “...Hey, Shinichi-san. Don’t act too thrilled.”

“No, it’s cool. It’s just, it’s my *dad’s*, and it... feels a little weird.” I smiled weakly.

Yes, I had read the novels and the manga, but the way I could see my old man’s face hovering behind each of the characters made it hard to feel moe about them. Judging from Hikaru-san’s expression, he’d planned this “cast reunion” just to get a rise out of me, but that made me even less sure how to react.

“So, Shinichi-san, you’re not curious what Myusel would look like as Viktorika?”

“Ermgh...?”

Viktorika, one of the characters of *The Burdened Princess*, was designed as your typical rich-chick character. Openly and unabashedly selfish, her personality was the exact opposite of Myusel’s, but that could make it all the more interesting to see Myusel take on her persona...!

“Uh, maybe I d—”

“You see?” Still grinning from ear to ear, Hikaru-san turned toward Myusel. She looked a little overwhelmed for a second, then her shoulders sagged.

“I-If that’s what you wish, Shinichi-sama,” she said, nodding.

“I also have no objection,” Clara said.

“*And* I have a little something for you, Shinichi-san,” Hikaru-san said.

“Is it Soru, by any chance?”

Soru was the main character (also a ninja) of *Angelica—The Burdened Princess*.

“Hardly. You really think you’re cut out for that?” Hikaru-san said. “No, you’re going to be Saizensen-kun.”

“But why?!”

“I’ve got a horizontally-striped shirt and a black rucksack ready to go

here."

"Not what I was asking." Did that even count as cosplay?

"We *are* at a cosplay party here. Don't just sulk in the corner, get out there and stalk amongst the other cosplayers with your camera around your neck, eyes glinting like a hungry wolf, a battlefield correspondent looking for his next great shot!" Hikaru-san gave me a triumphant look.

Er... I don't think any battlefield correspondents would be taking pictures of cosplayers...

But anyway...

"The point is, you want me to get off my duff and mix, right?"

"Yes indeed," Hikaru-san said.

There was a certain logic to what he was saying—I understood that just standing off to the side while everyone else was having fun could make me a bit of a killjoy. If I wasn't going to put on a costume, I should at least be taking pictures. So I reached into my pocket for my phone.

"Huh?" I couldn't feel it. I must have forgotten it in my room—today of all days. "Looks like I forgot my phone. I'll go get it while you two are changing."

"Excellent. Right this way, ladies," Hikaru-san said, ushering them over to a changing area. I watched them go, then darted for my room.

Ten minutes later. I was walking back down the hall toward the yard, phone in my hand. I wondered if Myusel and Clara had finished changing yet. Maybe not. Ten minutes just wasn't long enough. Images of them in their cosplay outfits (purely hypothetical) drifted through my mind. Myusel bashfully wearing her rich-girl dress; Clara looking expressionless and somehow pleased at the same time.

Oooh, I could hardly stand it. Even just in my mind's eye, it was almost more than I could process. Well, I wouldn't know for sure what they looked like until I saw them, but Hikaru-san had picked out their outfits personally, and he knew his cosplay. I didn't expect to be disappointed. Besides, girls that pretty would look good no matter what they wore.

I was striding down the hallway, grinning to myself, when...

"Huh?"

I spotted a door that was slightly ajar. That wasn't necessarily a

problem—the problem was that the door in question was the one to Amatena and Clara's room. And Amatena must have been in there at that moment. With Elvia at the party, she could hardly be outside.

"Not very cautious of her..."

I had given the students strict instructions not to go into her room, or any of the rooms except the ones with outlets and otaku stuff. They would probably pass this one by anyway, just a guestroom that normally wasn't used. I understood all that, but even so, what if somebody happened by, happened to look in? Especially with the door hanging open like that.

Maybe she just forgot to close it, or maybe she wanted to get a little air—she sure couldn't open the window that fronted the yard—but whatever it was, I would have to tell Amatena to be careful.

I poked my head in the door and was about to call Amatena's name, when I stopped.

There was Amatena, in Elvia's clothes and with Elvia's hair color, studying herself intently in the mirror. The expression her reflection wore was the picture of seriousness—I mean, she was always serious, but now even more than usual—and I hesitated to interrupt her. I felt like I shouldn't bother her.

"Hm?" Amatena herself turned, though—maybe she saw me in the mirror. "What is it, Shinichi?"

"Oh, uh, it's just, the door was open a little so... just be careful about that..."

After a moment, she nodded. "I see. I wanted to change the air in the room, but I admit that was incautious of me. My apologies."

"What are you up to?" I came into the room and shut the door behind me.

Amatena glanced away from me uncomfortably at first, but then she looked at a desk in the corner of the room. I followed her gaze, and saw two photographs sitting on the desk. Minori-san or Hikaru-san must have brought her hard copies of some of their photos.

"Can I see them?"

Beat. "Go ahead."

I walked over to the desk and looked at the photos. Both of them were of Amatena pretending to be Elvia. One of them showed her caught by surprise, the picture taken without warning. In the other, she had been told there was going to be a photo, and she wore her usual flat look.

“What are these about?”

She looked pretty good in both of them.

Amatena exhaled shortly. “I think it might be just as you said.”

“As I said?” I’d talked a lot with Amatena; I wondered what exactly she was referring to.

“The armor I wear to protect myself, the mask that hides my inner feelings... It might itself be what has me cornered.” As she spoke, Amatena turned back toward the mirror. She was the spitting image of Elvia, yet you could tell immediately that it wasn’t her, that it was Amatena. “What Hikaru said—I understand that, too.” She paused for an instant, almost hesitant. “Being with someone they can’t read is intensely uncomfortable for people—or maybe I should say, makes them nervous. So much so that they might want to be rid of her.”

“Well, that’s...”

...not true—was something I couldn’t say.

“I was so sure that I had to hide my vulnerabilities. Or rather... That it was best to *have* no vulnerabilities, which I still believe. But to erase my expression, keep the emotion from my voice, and wear an iron mask... I’ve begun to doubt whether that’s the best way to hide such weaknesses.”

I looked at the photographs again. If you asked me which of the two Amatenas I would rather be friends with, I would pick the one who looked surprised. The emotion on her face made her look approachable, like someone you could talk to.

And that... that was Elvia’s forte. I wondered if Amatena had been like her sister once, bubbling with feeling. But if you wore your heart on your sleeve too much, there was no shortage of bad guys willing to take advantage of it. Amatena resisted that by suppressing those feelings, but that took its toll, too.

“Not that I want to be spilling my emotions out everywhere like Elvia,” Amatena added, as if she could read my thoughts.

“Fair enough...”

Elvia’s footloose and fancy free attitude would definitely do more harm than good to a soldier or a spy. Not to mention that if she ever were actually captured by the Eldant side, it would make her all too prone to saying something she shouldn’t. But at the same time, when it came to someone who was cold, hard, close to the vest with everyone, not just her enemies—would I want to work with a person like that? I wouldn’t be too eager.

There had to be a balance to strike, I thought. Or maybe I was just being naïve.

"I may need to soften myself to a certain extent." Amatena's lips softened into something like a wry smile.

Ooh. Even a wry smile looked cute on her. Was this "moe by contrast"?

"Good thought." Smiling, I held up the phone in my hand for her to see. I tapped over to the camera function; the LCD screen filled with an image of Amatena's face. "In that case, how about a smile, Amatena? Nice and bright."

"Er...? B-Bright?"

"Just like Elvia would do. Like, *gri-i-in*!"

"'*Gri-i-in*'?"

So much for expressionless: now she was openly frowning. Well, at least she was showing some emotion. That was a start.

For a few minutes, I watched Amatena struggle to produce an "Elvia-esque" smile, and I couldn't help grinning myself.

The photography party was pretty much a success. Okay, so it ended up more focused on cosplay than photos, but everyone had fun, and most of them seemed to have mastered asking permission before taking a picture. Rather than simply scolding them and being all "Don't take pictures without asking!", it turned out to be a lot easier to get the message across by *showing* them that asking permission was a small thing that could make a big difference to everyone's enjoyment.

Most importantly, everyone went home with big smiles on their faces.

Granted, Petralka put up a bit of a fight ("We do not wish to go home yet!"), but I had kind of expected that. At length she was dragged off by Garius, who had come to get her. He came personally, by the way, just to be safe—because of some reports (he told me) that a Bahairamanian special forces group had crossed the border. To him, this didn't sound like the little skirmishes we'd been having.

Anyway, later that evening...

"Everything was really great today!" Minori-san said enthusiastically as we all sat at the dinner table. "Especially that 'reunion' for the cast of *Angelica*! Her Majesty looked fantastic. We'll have to give a copy of the

picture to Garius-san and everyone else."

"I really tried to go the extra mile for that costume," Hikaru-san said with a placid smile. "I was sure Her Majesty would look great as Angelica. I've been thinking about it for a long time now. This whole day was worth it just to see her in that outfit."

He really did sound happier than usual; it dawned on me that he had genuinely enjoyed himself. He himself could fall on the somewhat restrained, emotionless side, but when he was really having a good time, you could see it in his eyes.

"Of course," he added, "I loved the outfits for Myusel and the others, too."

"Yeah, they looked great in those costumes."

"Y-You think so...?" Myusel asked a little shyly, her cheeks flushing. She must have been tired from the photo party, but it didn't seem to have caused her to skimp on dinner. She was really diligent, or energetic, or something—in any case, a great maid.

"And Clara, thanks for all your help. You have fun?"

"Yes." She nodded, but she did look a little tired. Given that she was probably even more nervous than Myusel the entire time, that was understandable.

"You, Elvia?"

"It was a blast! I wanna do it again!" She grinned, and her tail wagged wildly. She had been dressed as a ninja, and by popular demand, she had closed out the party by jumping, lunging, climbing the trees, and generally acting like one.

"I wish Brooke and Cerise could have been part of it," I said.

The two lizard people, surprised to suddenly find the conversation turning to them, looked at each other.

"Us?" Brooke asked.

"You certainly don't have to worry about us," Cerise added.

Despite what they said, I really didn't want to leave them out of things. Obviously, if they tried it and it just didn't click for them, I wouldn't force them.

"These things are always more fun when everyone's involved," I said.

"That so? We'll have to take your word on it, Master." Brooke and Cerise looked at each other again.

I did have the distinct impression that there was a limited number of

costumes likely to suit a lizard person, but—no, wait. What about, like, Go***lla or something? Or go a step further: Mecha-Godzi***! Or did that leave the realm of cosplay and just turn into wearing a rubber suit?

"And Amatena, I'd love for you to be with us next time," I said, turning to her.

"No, I..."

"We could make you Elvia's twin!" Hikaru-san broke in excitedly.

"How's that?" Elvia asked, perplexed.

"Like, have you wear the same clothes, or matching costumes," Hikaru-san explained. "You see palette-swapped characters in fighting games all the time—characters who look exactly the same except for the color of their outfits. Or sometimes they even just look flat-out identical—though there's usually a limit to the similarities."

"You mean not just matching outfits, but making the two of them look exactly the same. Perfect twins. I like it," Minori-san said.

"Huh! Who knew?" Elvia said, impressed. Then she turned to her sister, who looked so much like her. "You shoulda been out there today, Big Sis Ama."

"That would have been impossible, and you know it."

"Oh, yeah. I guess I do." Elvia shrugged. She must have really enjoyed herself, because it seemed to have made her forget why Amatena and Clara were here. Then again, that sort of absentmindedness was very Elvia.

Suddenly, the dining area was assaulted by an earsplitting electronic noise. It wasn't the friendly ding that accompanies an email or a phone call; it was more like the sort of screech that accompanies an earthquake notification, a siren purposely designed to be disturbing. (Anyway, we didn't get email or phone calls here in the Eldant Empire.)

"Wh... What's that?"

Everyone in the dining area froze. Minori-san, though, pulled her phone out of her pocket. It turned out to be the source of the noise.

"Minori-san, is that...?"

"An alarm," she said, her face grim. She swiped across the phone screen, killing the sound.

"An alarm? Don't tell me..."

"Intruders."

That one word froze the atmosphere in the room.

After I had been kidnapped the last time, the JSDF set up high-fidelity

security cameras around the mansion. I didn't know exactly how they worked, but I knew they were equipped with infrared and sound sensors, among other things, and that they were connected to Minori-san's smartphone and computer, and would let her know if anything came up. They had probably also notified the JSDF garrison.

From there to here, though, would take seven or eight minutes, even by motor vehicle. They had to take a circuitous route through the woods, a route that didn't even really have a road, limiting their speed. Even if they jumped into action the moment they heard the alarm, including the time it would take them to get ready, we could be looking at ten minutes or more until they arrived.

"I'm seeing... seven—no, eight?" Minori-san said, studying her phone. "It's weird, though. The camera isn't showing any— Hey."

"What is it?" I asked, and Minori-san showed me her phone.

I was looking at what seemed like a video clip. It showed what the camera had captured over the past ten seconds or so.

"Wh-What the heck is this?" For a second, I thought maybe there was some kind of glitch in the video. It showed a forest at night—the one just outside the mansion. It looked pretty normal, honestly. Except, there was this one part of the image that kept sort of shifting. It's hard to describe, but it was like some of the scenery would slide out of place for an instant, then go back. Then slide, then go back.

"My guess is camouflage," Minori-san said.

"Camouflage? You'd have to be talking, like, active camo to get an effect like this."

I had seen this sort of thing before—but only in movies like *Pre**tor* or anime like *Ghost in *** Shell*. They were disguises that went beyond just blending in. There was an instant of lag when you moved, as they adjusted to their new surroundings, but if a person wasn't paying attention, such camouflage would be almost impossible to notice.

"Clara..."

"Yes, Elder Sister."

Amatena and Clara both stood up.

"Wh-What's the story?" Elvia asked, eyes wide. But Amatena didn't even glance at her—instead, she turned to Minori-san.

"Pursuers."

"You think you know who they are?"

“Among the beast-person units in the Bahairamanian army is one squad that specializes in concealment techniques. It’s a small unit, but they’re elite veterans. They wouldn’t be mobilized just to hide a little domestic strife. They specialize in assassination and kidnapping. When I captured Shinichi, they were the unit I used.”

We all looked at her, astounded. This incredibly advanced camouflage, though—what was it? Some kind of magic? Beast people weren’t supposed to have a lot of magical power, though. I had been told they could hardly use basic spells.

“The Eleamachi tribe?” The question came from, of all people, Brooke.

“That’s right.” Amatena nodded.

“Who or what is that?”

“A lizardman tribe that’s not quite like the rest of us,” Brooke explained. “They can change their skin color, y’see. There’s only so many colors they have, and only so fast they can do it, but in the middle of the woods? One could be standing right next to you and y’d never know it.”

“Color changers... Almost like chameleons...”

“Where are you going?!” Hikaru-san shouted. We looked up to see Amatena and Clara nearly out of the dining room.

“We can’t cause any more trouble for you. We’re leaving,” Amatena said brusquely.

“But we don’t know if they’re really after you or what,” I objected.

“Who else could they possibly be after? Frankly, I’m amazed they didn’t get here sooner. Bahairam knows that Elvia... my sister... They know she’s here. They must have known I would go to her if I were ever in trouble.”

“But—”

“We can’t afford the commotion a battle here would cause. Then the Eldant forces would know about us, too.”

So that’s why they were trying to leave. Amatena and Clara nodded at each other and made to go again.

Elvia, though, jumped out of her chair. “B-Big Sis Ama! It’s too dangerous to go now—!”

“We have no choice.”

“But you... But I...”

She was desperate to stop them, but she couldn’t seem to get the words out. And logically, Amatena was exactly right. And yet...

“I was... happy that you took our side,” Amatena said, looking at Elvia.

“Wha...? Sis...?”

Elvia was obviously taken by surprise; all she could manage were a couple of startled half-questions. Amatena, seeming to feel there was no need to say more, turned to leave.

“U-Um!” Someone else stood up and called out. Someone surprising.

“Myusel?” I said.

“Um... I agree that now isn’t the time to go out there...!” She had to force herself to speak, but she sounded convinced. She wasn’t looking at Amatena so much as at Clara.

“Don’t burden yourself,” Amatena said. “Two people who should never have been here, won’t be here. It’s nothing more than—”

“But me, I—!” Myusel didn’t seem to feel the same way. “I have someone to... to teach, and that makes me... happy... and so... well... I disagree that you shouldn’t... shouldn’t be here...!”

Amatena was completely silent. Clara didn’t speak or show any expression. But I thought I saw her tail shift almost imperceptibly. It was something I had seen any number of times back in Bahairam. I had never asked her, but I thought it was a sign that she was happy. And so...

“I agree with Myusel and Elvia,” I said. “I think you should stay here.” If there was one thing I knew about these two, though, it was that emotional pleading wouldn’t convince them. So I started talking fast, almost desperately, adding logical arguments for why they should stay. And logical arguments are, if I may say so, something I’m pretty good at. “Even if you get out of here without causing a commotion, if the Eldant authorities find out there were Bahairamanian troops in here looking for you, it might lead them back to the fact that we were hiding you. Elvia’s here, after all.”

“That’s...”

“You aren’t the only ones with skin in this game,” I insisted, and then I turned to Minori-san. “Minori-san, can you give me a rough idea where these intruders are?”

“Just behind the house, I’d say.” I could hear a note of anxiousness in her voice.

This was bad. These were enemies we couldn’t afford to take lightly.

No. The enemy’s strength isn’t the problem. The JSDF should be here any minute, so actually...

Enemies approaching the mansion.

Bahairamanian soldiers.

Amatena. Clara.

The time I had been kidnapped...

I paused for a long moment.

Ahhh. Okay.

“If they’re that close already, then that only makes it more likely they’ll spot you when you leave the mansion. Wouldn’t it be easier to pass this off as another attempt by Bahairam to kidnap me, or maybe Hikaru-san?”

“Shinichi-sama, that...” Myusel was looking at me, shocked.

I looked around the dining area at them: Minori-san, who had looked up from her phone; Amatena and Clara, still standing there; Elvia, Hikaru-san, Brooke and Cerise. I nodded with a lopsided smile. “I think the best thing would be to beat them back right here.”

Obviously, even I wasn’t stupid enough to think we could take on a Bahairamanian special-forces unit or commando squadron or whatever head-on. Elvia, Amatena, and Clara might have exceptional physical

abilities, but so would our attackers, and because they were coming specifically for Amatena and Clara, they would be ready for a couple of beast girls. Toe to toe? Not happening.

If this really was the same squadron Amatena had used to kidnap me, there was also a good chance they would already know who all was in the house and what our fighting capabilities were. In other words, we didn't have a prayer unless we could come up with something completely unexpected. But we didn't exactly have a lot of time to set a trap or come up with a plan, either. That limited our options.

"I hope this works," I murmured, looking at my phone where I sat in the living room. Minori-san had given me the password so that my phone could hook into the alarm system to get notifications and video. The cameras around our building gave us a good idea of approximately where the Eleamachi, the color-changing lizardpeople, were.

For the moment I had Brooke and Cerise going around, pretending to inspect the house.

No matter how well they could hide themselves, when the Elemachi moved, there was a sort of flicker. Meaning that as long as somebody was looking directly at them, they would want to stay still. Having Brooke and Cerise out there, moving around, would help slow them down. If we could buy ourselves some time that way, so much the better for us.

I also asked Minori-san to tell the JSDF to abort its mission, on the pretext that this was a false alarm. If the JSDF garrison got involved, the Eldant army was sure to know about it, and the chances of Amatena and Clara being discovered would shoot up. My plan was for us to handle the Bahairamanians without help.

"Shinichi-sama," Myusel said as she entered the living room. She had changed into a one-piece dress, I assumed because it was easier to move in than a maid uniform. "Where are the others?"

"Not here yet. I think they'll be ready soon."

If this took too long, my whole strategy would go out the window. Actually, I was a little embarrassed to even call it a "strategy," considering that it amounted to a bad joke.

"You know, you kind of surprised me," I said.

"I'm sorry...?"

"I never expected you to be the one to stop Clara."

Myusel blinked. The truth was, she had no reason to stand up for Clara.

Yes, they were working together as maids, but that was just a way of giving Clara cover. And Myusel was only doing it because I had asked her to; she didn't have any special interest in Clara. If anything, it must have significantly added to her stress, having to lie to Petralka. I never expected them to get so close that Myusel would come to see Clara as a sort of student.

"I see... Yes, of course," Myusel said with a small smile. Yes, small—but there was kindness in her eyes. "To have an apprentice, someone to lookout for... It really made me happy."

"Yeah, that's what you said."

"And..." Myusel glanced at me; she almost didn't go on.

Hm...? That little look she gave me, sort of glancing up at me—you'd think I'd be used to it by now, but it still made my heart pound.

"Talking with Clara-san has even taught me about myself. It's shown me things I wasn't even aware of."

She seemed to be talking to herself more than to me. "What do you mean?" I asked, but she gave a shrug and an embarrassed smile and didn't go on.

If I had pressed her just one more time, she might have told me what she was thinking, but at just that moment, Minori-san came up. "Shinichi-kun, Myusel." She was holding—not her usual 9mm, or even a machine pistol, but a stun gun, something nonfatal. It probably had less to do with not wanting to kill the Bahairamanian troops than with not wanting any gunshots. "Just to be clear, in the event that Shinichi-kun or Hikaru-kun is in any kind of danger, I'm going to use my gun, understand?"

I assumed she meant her pistol. In other words, our safety was her priority, over and above keeping Amatena's and Clara's secret. She wasn't going to go along with any more of my cajoling or my little plans. That was her job; I was grateful she had even been willing to call off the JSDF for me.

"Understood," I said, trying to stay calm.

That was when Elvia and Hikaru-san came in.

"We got it!"

It was kind of nauseating to watch.

Over and over, a piece of the scenery roughly the size and shape of a human being would flicker and slide, like someone was fiddling with it in a photo program, before melting back to normal.

Our antagonists, the Eleamachi Tribe, could change the color of their scales to match the surrounding scenery, but they didn't actually become translucent or anything. Like a ninja hiding among the stones by wearing gray clothes, if they were to walk straight down the halls of our mansion without sticking to the walls, we would notice them immediately.

Even so, the ability to shift colors was threatening. The patterns they assumed were detailed—and fast. Color-changing animals like chameleons and frogs couldn't exercise their talents instantaneously. But the Eleamachi Tribe—granted they were going slowly, but they were almost indistinguishable from their surroundings within seconds of moving. Apparently there was a creature, the golden cuttlefish, that could change the color of its skin in just over a second using polarized light, so it was sometimes called "the chameleon of the sea." The Eleamachi seemed to have more in common with the cuttlefish than with actual chameleons.

I could hardly imagine what survival strategies had produced a tribe of lizardmen with an ability like that. Or maybe this world didn't even function on evolution.

I had to set those thoughts aside, though.

"Okay, stop right there," I declared when I saw that seven Eleamachi had entered the living room.

At the same moment, I switched on the two key lights we'd set up in there. This wasn't like normal illumination, coming from all around; a strong light thrown in a single direction creates shadows. In photography, this helps produce a sense of depth. In our case, though, the shadows would pinpoint exactly where the Eleamachi were. Their little invisibility trick wouldn't work anymore.

The Eleamachi tribesmen froze. Unsure what to shift to, their bodies were covered in a mottling of strange in-between colors. Now that I got a good look at them, I could see that they were the spitting image of chameleons. They looked basically like Brooke, but their eyes were extra large, practically seeming to pop out of their heads. To be honest, it was kind of grotesque.

"I won't ask you to surrender," I said. "Go home quietly, and nothing else has to happen."

The Eleamachi glanced around with those bulging eyes—then they all spotted me at once and assumed fighting postures. Made sense, I guess. What special-ops squad would pack up and go home just because you asked them politely?

At that moment, though, my friends jumped out from where they had been hiding in a corner of the room—Elvia and Minori-san, along with Amatena and Clara. All armed. Not with weapons, exactly: Amatena and Clara had a meat tenderizer and a wooden pestle they'd borrowed from Myusel, while Elvia had a stew pot. Knowing that we would be facing scaled opponents in tight quarters, we decided blunt instruments would do more good than clumsy edged weapons. Although to be fair, Minori-san was carrying her stun gun.

I was hoping it would be enough to help us fend off enemies who were practically unarmed. Based on the Eleamachis' special skills, I didn't expect them to be carrying anything too large. After all, they couldn't change the color of weapons and gear. But then...

"Huh?" I let out a sound of shock. Each of the Eleamachi opened their huge jaws, like a tear appearing in their faces, and produced a dagger from their own stomach. And not by reaching in with their hands, either—they used their exceptionally long tongues.

Come to think of it, Amatena had said the Eleamachi Tribe carried concealed weapons, but I hadn't expected them to conceal them like this. I had assumed they would have brass knuckles, or maybe needles at the most. What was this, the *International Shocker Show*?!

There was a piercing clang as Amatena and the others blocked the daggers with the objects they were holding.

"Amatena Hareneiman, give up and hand yourself over to us," one of the Eleamachi tribesmen demanded, even as he traded blows with her. They had seven fighters; we had four. Myusel and I were here, of course, and the Eleamachi probably knew about Hikaru-san, Brooke, and Cerise—but they felt they had brought enough people. The truth was, most of this mansion's residents weren't going to be much help in a straight fight.

"We can give you an easy death, if you don't struggle."

"Hm?" Amatena cocked an eyebrow. "No plans to take me back to Bahairam and interrogate me?"

"Word is, it's better if you *don't* come back alive," the Eleamachi said, rolling his big eyes.

The next second, I let out a sort of surprised choking sound. “Guh...?!” The Eleamachi tribesmen suddenly started changing colors at incredible speed. Amatena and the others, as surprised as I was, took a step back from their opponents. The Eleamachi weren’t camouflaging themselves anymore; now we could see exactly where they were. But the rapid-fire succession of random colors made it almost impossible to tell what we were looking at—what was a hand, and what was a head? Where were their chests? All we could see were the flashing colors, no idea where the next attack might come from.

“Hrgh—!” Amatena and Clara didn’t find it any easier to fight than anyone else. The Eleamachi pursued them as they backed up. The chameleon people moved to surround us. This must have been the ace up their sleeves, the last resort they held in reserve to give them the edge when they needed it. This went beyond hiding: they were using their color-changing abilities as an offensive tactic, to confuse their opponents. In fact, the better a martial artist you were, the more confusing it would probably be.

“Die—!” One of the Eleamachi lashed out with his dagger.

The next instant, a white mist hit his face. Startled, he froze, and then backed up. The mist, though, spread out and pursued him and his companions. It was coming from under my chair, and in a matter of seconds it had filled the entire room.

“What’s this?!” the Eleamachi growled. “Are you fools? You’re just—”

—*blinding yourselves*, I think he was about to say. And sure, practically speaking, we had just made it harder to see. That’s a smoke machine for you. If you use it in an enclosed space, it gets smoky.

But that wasn’t actually our goal.

“What’s... going on...?” The Eleamachi’s voice was suddenly sluggish. Perfect. It was working.

“You know how a smoke machine works?” I asked, reflecting that he probably didn’t. Okay, so monologuing was more of a villain thing, but I decided to fill them in anyway. “The smoke comes from dumping dry ice into water. When the water evaporates, it causes the dry ice to vaporize and takes the heat in the air with it.” That’s why smoke machines could be used like impromptu refrigerators. Most of us have probably gotten ice cream in the summer and had it stashed in some fog-spewing water/dry ice combination to keep it cool.

Well, that's exactly what I was doing. Hikaru-san had a bunch of dry ice on hand to fuel his cosplay smoke machine. To be more precise, he'd apparently imported an industrial dry ice producer, with which he induced the JSDF garrison to make a bunch of dry ice. I just appropriated the extra, you might say. There was more than enough of it to fill an enclosed room with cold vapor.

By the way, some people confuse the smoke with carbon dioxide, but actually it was just tiny particles of water and ice. Literally fog. While it dissipated into invisible water vapor in a matter of moments, it took atmospheric heat with it when it did so. And unlike humans, who could produce their own body heat to compensate, the Eleamachi were lizardmen whose body temperature would drop when they were exposed to the fog—and that meant they would move slower. Just like Brooke trying to wake up in the morning.

"Grrrr..." Even so, it looked like they still wanted to fight.

"Tifu Murottsu!" Myusel and I added our magic spells to the mix, causing a whirlwind in our living room. The air swirled around, the lizardmen surrounded by whipping fog that made the air colder and colder. It was like turning a fan on in a chilly room.

And then, when they were feeling good and dull, Amatena, Clara, and Minori-san jumped on them.

That was how we succeeded in fending off the Eleamachi tribe. Cold and slow, they were no match for Amatena and Minori-san. They and Clara tied up the lizards and stuck them in a bathtub full of cold water. That would keep them nice and docile for a while, ropes or no ropes.

We left Brooke and Cerise to guard them, then the rest of us went to the living room to talk about our next move. Specifically that included me, Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and Elvia, along with Amatena and Clara; Myusel went to the kitchen, saying she would bring tea.

"Still, the fact that their objective wasn't arrest, but assassination..." Amatena crossed her arms. "I'm speculating somewhat, but I think it's highly likely that the Eleamachis' orders came from my superiors, or possibly even over their heads."

"What do you mean?"

“If they didn’t want to question me—if they thought it was *better* not to... then probably, the higher-ups were hoping to pin their own crimes on me. Then they could say they had killed me, and no one would be the wiser.”

“Ahh. I get it...” I nodded. They say dead men tell no tales, or in this case, I guess, dead beast girls. Amatena was going to be their scapegoat, sort of like how politicians accused of corruption always tried to pin things on their secretaries.

“That’s not cool,” Hikaru-san said, disturbed. “But it does make it look more and more like your arrest was a mistake, or at least the military police getting too eager...”

“I wonder whatever happened to make ’em doubt you, Big Sis Ama.” Elvia didn’t seem very interested in the niceties of what was going on, but this particular detail bothered her.

“Well, a little interrogation of our friends the lizards might clear a few things up,” Minori-san said. Then she turned toward the door. “Oh. Myusel...”

Myusel must have been back with the tea. I turned, too, and—

“Guhuh?”

—froze in shock.

That was Myusel at the door, all right. And she was pushing her tea cart, too—but there was a knife at her throat.

“Shinichi...sa...ma...” The dark blade was pressed into the pale flesh of her neck. A gentle push, a slight pull, and the room would be a bloodbath.

“Looks like we missed one,” Minori-san growled.

Standing there behind Myusel was one of the Eleamachi tribe. Come to think of it, when the alarm first went off, we hadn’t been able to see exactly how many of them there were—seven, or eight? I counted seven who came inside, and had foolishly assumed that was all of them. But I guess they’d left one behind. Maybe he’d had a mission of his own, or maybe he was directing things from the rear. It didn’t matter now, because here we were.

“Let the others go,” the Eleamachi hissed, “or the girl dies.” He didn’t shout, and there was no note of triumph in his voice. He sounded absolutely cold and calculating. If he had been agitated, I would have thought we might be able to provoke him, or plead with him—in any case, talk our way into some kind of opening. When you were dealing with someone as calm as this, that was a lot harder.

Crap. What do we do?

Mentally sweating, I struggled to come up with a plan, but my mind was a blank.

Minori-san drew her 9mm. “Kill her, and you’d better believe you’ll die about one second later.” If this were a TV show or something, this was where she would make a spectacular sniper shot, hitting the bad guy in the head without grazing the hostage. But I didn’t think I could expect that now. For starters, we were dealing with a color-changing lizard, whose abilities made it very hard to tell what was his head and what was his body. And if we didn’t take him out with one single shot to a vital point, we could be sure he would cut Myusel’s throat.

“I wouldn’t be in the special forces if I had any fear of death,” the Eleamachi returned calmly. Minori-san bit her lip and said nothing. She certainly knew and understood everything that I did.

This was bad. We were out of options...

Bong.

There was some kind of dull sound.

An instant later, the Eleamachi crumpled to the ground. Well, actually, his right arm didn’t move; it continued to hold the knife at Myusel’s throat. Slowly, the Eleamachi lowered it. It looked bizarre, but finally I caught on: someone else, behind the Eleamachi agent, was holding his arm.

Wait...

Someone else?!

As we watched in amazement, someone appeared behind the reeling Myusel. They were dressed all in black, only their eyes visible. They looked even ninja-ier than the Eleamachi had.

And then, suddenly, there were several more of the masked people. They stepped out from behind the first one, each of them also dressed in black. One went to the left, one to the right. Three of them in all. And then the one in the center pulled off their mask.

The first thing I saw was short, blond hair. The gold-fringed face looked very familiar. In fact, two people who looked just like her were sitting beside me.

“Big Sis Jiji?!” Elvia exclaimed.

“Elder sister?” Amatena said, sounding every bit as surprised as Elvia.

“Wait. ‘Big Sis’ Jiji?” The name rang a bell. Elvia and Amatena had

both mentioned it to me in the past.

"It's Jijilea! Our big sister!"

...Huh? Will someone tell me what's going on?

What was Elvia and Amatena's older sister doing here? Completely and totally confused, I just sat there, not moving.

In contrast, Jijilea looked at Elvia and Amatena, and then a sort of easy smile came across her finely-formed lips. "The cleanup's finished."

If nothing else, it looked like they weren't there to hurt us. By way of proof, Jijilea and the others made a show of putting their weapons down. Each carried a short sword—almost a dagger—and of course, we didn't know if they might have other weapons under those black pajamas. Well, there was no way to be completely sure we could trust Jijilea at this moment. The fact that she and the others were making any conciliatory gestures would have to be reassurance enough.

For the time being, we ushered them into the living room. Elvia and Amatena laid down their arms (well, their cooking utensils), but Minori-san kept her 9mm at the ready. Given what had happened back when she'd rescued me from Bahairam, there was a good chance Jijilea knew something about the mysterious ranged weapon carried by the outlander woman. But she didn't look overly worried about it.

“Big Sis Jiji, what’s this about cleanup?” Elvia demanded. We were seated on the sofas, but the two people accompanying Jijilea didn’t sit down, nor did they take off their masks. They stood by the wall. Jijilea herself sat on the other sofa facing us. She really did look just like her little sister. I mean, with golden hair and all, but a short-haired Elvia had an appeal all its own. It emphasized the beast features.

“Please don’t be upset, Elvia,” Jijilea said firmly. “I’ll explain everything.” She was smiling, as she had been ever since she first showed her face. She looked calm, in control. If Elvia was the hyperkinetic third child, and Amatena was the serious middle baby, then was Jijilea the easygoing oldest daughter?

She broke into my mental attempt to classify the beast girls. “So you would be Shinichi-san?”

“Huh? Er, yes,” I said, unconsciously straightening up. She gave me what seemed like a very pointed smile—then looked at Amatena.

“I’ll tell you something, Amatena—we knew you were communicating with Shinichi-san.” She sounded completely blasé, but Amatena went stiff with shock. The elder Harneiman sister, however, went on as if she were discussing the weather. “And we knew it involved Elvia somehow.”

“Ahh... err...” Elvia quickly looked away from Jijilea.

“So it wasn’t too hard to guess where you’d run off to.”

“And so you’re here to arrest me...?” Amatena’s voice sounded even flatter than usual; maybe she was really worried.

Jijilea, though, shook her head. “No. Different issue.”

“Why, then?”

“You’re more than aware of the corruption spreading through the upper ranks of the military right now, yes?” She had the tone of housewife spreading gossip: *“Did you hear? The Kanous’ boy stopped going to school!”* Jijilea went on: “It finally got to where it couldn’t be overlooked anymore.”

“That’s what the purge was for, wasn’t it?” Amatena said.

“Yes, but if you confront them, just try to arrest them outright, no one’s going to play along. They all have backup plans, they all know how to get away. None of them are stupid, and some of them have a certain amount of status and authority.”

Well... Fair enough. If you go around announcing that you’re out to end corruption, the corrupt people aren’t going to just sit there and wait for you

to gather evidence and find witnesses. Even less so if they're powerful enough to control others. I had a sneaking suspicion there might have been a sudden rash of suicides in Bahairam. Scary stuff.

"See?" Jijilea smiled and brought her hands together in front of her face, like she was praying, or maybe asking for a little favor. *"Say, Sis, I've got a great idea..."*

"So we decided to put on a little show," Jijilea said. "Officially, we told them we were going to gin up something to pin on you and then move to arrest you. But while they thought we were busy with that, we were looking for anything we could find against them."

Elvia, Amatena, and Clara all looked at each other, openly shocked. If what Jijilea was saying was true, then Amatena and Clara had been nothing but bait, a pretext, a trap laid to catch corrupt military officials. And the girls themselves hadn't known anything about it; they had danced like a couple of puppets on strings.

Now I understood why the Eleamachi tribe had been sent in. If Amatena and Clara never came back alive, then all was well and good. But if they were captured by the military police and interrogated, it might be discovered that they were actually innocent—and there couldn't be anything worse for the corrupt officials. That was why they needed the beast girls dead... Yikes. Even scarier stuff.

"We've done a bit of cleaning house in the army, though, so we're here to bring you home."

"So I've been dancing in the palm of my older sister's hand this entire time..." Amatena mumbled. Jijilea didn't answer; she just smiled.

Clara was looking from Amatena to Jijilea, expressionless; while Elvia was glaring at her oldest sister. I guess no matter what the reasons were, you couldn't expect anyone to just go, "Oh, I see! So that's the story! Thanks, Sis!"

"I don't mind telling you, it was rough," Jijilea said, as if she didn't even see the reactions of the other women. "Took longer than we expected, too. More people were implicated in the corruption than we thought. And we can only put so many people on the force, for security reasons. I would have loved to come get you sooner, but..."

"I can't believe you, Big Sis Jiji!" Elvia, finally unable to take it any longer, exploded.

"Er...?" Jijilea just looked at her, bemused. Even Amatena seemed a

little surprised. Maybe she was taken aback that Elvia seemed to be angrier about this than she was.

“Big Sis Ama almost got arrested—hell, she almost got killed! Do you realize that? What would you have done if they’d killed her?!”

“I knew Amatena of all people would figure a way out,” Jijilea said as though she was talking to a frightened child. “And nobody killed anybody, so what’s the big deal? I’m so lucky to have such capable little sisters.” She grinned, Elvia’s anger just rolling off her back.

Huh... I was starting to get a pretty good picture of what kind of person Jijilea was. She might sound totally calm, even pretty nice, like she wouldn’t hurt a fly. But she was the most ruthless of them all. A classic two-faced character. I finally understood what Elvia had meant when she said “Big Sis Jiji” was the most accomplished of all her sisters. She seemed like she could claw her way to the top of any organization.

But what did we do now? She wasn’t really our enemy... but she wasn’t really our friend, either. And she seemed like the type who would be perfectly willing to “deceive her allies in order to deceive her enemies,” and do it with a smile.

Silently, I looked over at Minori-san to get her opinion. She seemed to be thinking the same thing I was: with a small sigh, she slid her gun back into its holster.

At length, it was decided that Amatena and Clara would go home to Bahairam with Jijilea and her squad.

I’d wondered how they had been able to get into the mansion without setting off the alarms, but my question was answered when they summoned their ride home. A Puppet Drake, one of the dragons with a control spike in its forehead, drifted soundlessly down from above. It was enough to make me go weak at the knees. The dragon’s belly was painted black, so that if you looked up, it would probably seem no more than a part of the night sky. Jijilea and the others had arrived on its back, deposited directly beside the mansion like a special-ops squad inserting via helicopter.

“Thank you for all that you did for us.” Amatena, fresh from a quick rinse to return her fur to its original color, bowed to me.

I smiled and shook my head. “I had a good time. Oh, and here.” I gave

her a souvenir I'd prepared.

She took it with surprise—a hinged wooden photo frame. It was folded up at the moment so she couldn't see what was inside. "What's this...?" She stared at the gift.

"It's called a photo frame. You can open it, if you want."

I'd just grabbed it from my room a moment ago.

Slowly, Amatena unfolded the frame. Inside were two pictures. One was the photo of a very surprised Amatena that Hikaru-san had taken. The other was one I'd taken at the photo party—it was of Amatena, disguised as Elvia, but smiling hesitantly.

Amatena's eyes were wide. "These are..."

"I had to get it together in a hurry. Sorry." Pressed for time, I'd just grabbed a frame from my room. Secondhand, if you will. I'd had some pictures of Myusel and Petralka in it. The photos that were in there now, I'd printed out in a hurry. They weren't dedicated high-quality prints; if you looked closely enough, they might not look great. But heck, for this purpose, it would probably be fine.

Amatena gave the photos a long, hard stare—then slowly closed the frame. "It was a trying experience... but not without its joys," she said almost in a whisper. She looked up, and just for an instant I thought I saw the ghost of a smile on her face. But then she was back to her usual expressionless self.

Well, these things don't change overnight. One small step, that was a good start.

"Amatena, Clara, just about time to go," Jijilea said from behind them. Amatena nodded at her, then turned back to me.

"Well, then."

"Take care, Big Sis Ama," Elvia said, her tail wagging energetically.

"And you."

Come to think of it... I didn't know exactly how long Elvia had been in Eldant as a spy, but I'll bet it had been a long time since she'd had a chance to just spend a few quiet moments with her sister. The circumstances that brought Amatena to our house hadn't exactly been easy—in fact, it had all been kind of a pain in the neck—but Elvia was still happy about it.

"Come for a visit sometime," I said.

It would make Elvia happy.

"I don't think it'll be that simple," Amatena said with a half-smile.

Then I turned to Clara. “Take care of yourself, Clara.”

“I will. And you, Shinichi-sama.” She nodded to me, and I nodded back.

Then, Clara bounded toward me. Before I could so much as wonder what was going on, she had gotten up on her tiptoes and—

Smack!

—planted a soft kiss right on my cheek.

“C-Cl-Clara?!”

I of course registered immediately that this was the second time she’d kissed me on the cheek. My hand went to the spot where she had planted the kiss. Clara looked at me, at how totally startled I was, and smiled. From a girl who so rarely showed any expression, just a simple smile was an immensely powerful thing. I felt my heart skip a beat.

Then there was a soft tug on my sleeve, at the elbow, and I took a questioning step back. I turned to find that it was Myusel with a grip on my shirt. And for once, uncharacteristically, she looked annoyed; she leveled a reproachful stare at Clara.

Huh? What?

I was only getting more and more confused. But Elvia, who had watched the whole thing in amazement, shook herself out of her reverie and exclaimed, “Wh-What’re y’ doin’, Clara?!” She reached out to my cheek and began wiping at it with her palm, as if to get rid of some dirt.

“Ah—ow! E-Elvia, that—that hurts!”

“Just saying goodbye,” Clara said mildly.

“I never heard of sayin’ goodbye like that!”

I looked back and forth from one of them to the other while Elvia kept working at my cheek as if she were going to take the skin right off. *Uh... pretty sure I’m headed for a snakebite here...*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Myusel, still looking upset.

“I see you’re well down the path of the heartbreaker, Shinichi-kun,” Minori-san chirped, evidently amused.

No—hey—heartbreaker? How can I be a heartbreaker when I’m the classic case of turned-into-a-shut-in-after-getting-shot-down-by-his-childhood-best-friend?

“You really have no limits, do you, Shinichi-san?” Hikaru-san said, and started counting off on his fingers. “You’ve had a kiss from Clara, you’ve shoved Amatena to the ground... What else was there?”

“No limits”?! Neither of those things was my fault! They were accidental, not deliberate, and I’m innocent, innocent, innocent! I demand a retrial! (Technical difficulties.)

“That’s right! He’s right!” Elvia shouted. She mercifully stopped rubbing my cheek, but instead she grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and stared into my face. “You pushed over Big Sis Ama in the bath, didn’t you?!”

“How many times do we have to go over this?! I didn’t *do* anything!”

“Didn’t y’ really?” Elvia demanded, looking very menacing.

Ahhh... Why’s she got to get so angry at me?

To top it off, Amatena was watching us with a frown. “Seems like you’ve got it rough yourself,” she said—not to me, but to Elvia.

Wait, now Amatena’s scoring off me?!

Was this an attack? Was I being attacked?! What had I even done?! I was beginning to panic at the repercussions of crimes I didn’t even remember committing when...

“Amatena, Clara,” Jijilea called from the back of the Puppet Drake. “Hate to interrupt, but I think it’s time to get going.”

“Yes’m,” Amatena and Clara said, and got on the dragon. It flapped its huge wings, a dark form receding slowly into the night.

Finally...

“Hey, is it just me, or is Amatena, y’know, *lost*?”

“Yeah, I got the same vibe. Like how she only smiled at Shinichi-san.”

“Shinichi-sama, I’m expectin’ my ‘phase of the moon’ tomorrow—!”

“*Two* different wives from among the locals? For an otaku, he really gets around.”

“An otaku? More like a monster.”

“...Um, Shinichi-sama... I... ahem...”

“So I don’t have t’ hold back anymore, do I? Do I?”

Long after our Bahairamanian visitors had disappeared into the sky, the girls (and Hikaru-san) continued to harangue me about things I didn’t realize I had done.

It had been a day since Amatena and Clara had left. I felt a little lonely, the way you do when two people you’ve been living with suddenly move

out, but partly it may just have been a hangover from the constant anxiety of hiding them.

Of course, the only thing that had really happened was that our lives went back to normal. My day had been pretty much the way my days were before Amatena and Clara had shown up.

"Here you are, Shinichi-sama."

The way Myusel brought me a snack when I was working into the night was back to normal, too. Of course, that had never really changed, even while Amatena and Clara had been here.

"Thanks."

Tonight's snack was a pair of small baked goods, sort of like croissants. Maybe the idea was that they would be easy to eat with one hand. I reached out for one without getting out of my chair. I'd been putting off a lot of work, and now I had to catch up.

"That was a rough few days, huh?" I said, taking a sip of the tea Myusel had so thoughtfully brewed for me. "I'm sorry about that. I know you ended up with a lot of extra work and just trouble all around."

"Not at all," Myusel said with a smile. That smile, too, was just like normal. But then she paused, looking a little distressed. "Oh... But... It was a little uncomfortable, lying to Her Majesty..."

Yes, I had effectively ordered her to do it, but deceiving Her Majesty the Empress was probably something Myusel had never expected to be doing in her life. She was too sweet, and her relationship with Petralka was too good, and she probably felt pretty guilty about it.

"Fair point..." I said, and crossed my arms. "It might get me yelled at—but I'm going to tell Petralka everything."

I had gone back and forth with myself, but ultimately that was my decision. It would be better to be out in front of it, to confess and apologize, than for the whole thing to come to light later. If I framed it in terms of having planted a seed of sympathy for Eldant in the middle of Bahairam's army, they might even forgive me for it.

"Say," I said.

"Yes?"

"You said talking with Clara helped you realize something. What was it?"

"Er..." Myusel suddenly went beet red. "W-Well, uh, it was, ahem..." She looked at the ground in embarrassment—and then, as if that wasn't

enough, hugged the plate she was holding to her chest.

Huh? What was it? Was it that embarrassing?

"H-Hey, it's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I don't mean to pry."

"Oh... No... I just..." Myusel shook her head ever so slightly, not looking up. "Clara-san and I talked about you, Shinichi-sama..."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh. And she said you had your heart set on someone..."

"What?!" This was news to me. "What the heck?!"

"Is she wrong? I thought she ought to know..."

Clara said that? But why...

"...Oh." Then I remembered. I remembered how back when I had been kidnapped by Bahairam, and I had been trying to stave off Clara, who had orders to get it on with me, I'd used that line as an excuse. She still thought it was true... and she had told Myusel.

"When I heard that, I really didn't like it..."

"Huh...?"

I wondered what that could mean.

Wait... Wait... What's going on...?

Myusel just looked at the ground, red-faced, not saying anything. But I wasn't any better. I just blushed and couldn't speak, either.

There was a moment of silence between us as if time had stood still. Then, finally, Myusel summoned up her courage and said, "".....U-Um... Shinichi-sama, even if... even if you are sick... I still..."

"Sick? What?"

"I mean, how you'll die if you touch a woman's skin..."

"Buh? The heck are you talking about?" I said, but then I remembered that, too. Another excuse I had given Clara...

Wait, so Clara told Myusel about that?! What had they been talking about?!

"Uh-uh, no! There is no such illness! That's just a lie I made up to keep Clara from jumping me!"

"There... There isn't? It is?" Myusel looked practically relieved.

...Okay, whoa, wait just a second.

Why would Myusel be relieved about that?

No, Shinichi, don't get any funny ideas. Don't get your hopes up. Remember how sure you were about Shouko, about your old friend, and

look how that turned out! You want that to happen again—with Myusel*? You'd never recover!*

I tried to bring myself down from the bizarre high I was suddenly experiencing.

Explode, you damn real! Explode, you damn real! Explode, you damn real! Explode, you damn real!

(This was very important, so I repeated it four times!)

There I was, heart pounding, when—

"Shinichi-sama!"

The door flew open so hard I thought it would fly off its hinges.

"Yipes!"

"Eek!"

Myusel and I both exclaimed. And in came...

"E-Elvia?" Yes, it was Elvia standing in the doorway. And she had some sort of cup in one hand. "Wh-What's going on?"

"I brought y' a late-night snack!" she said, all but running over to me.

"Th-Thanks. But Myusel already brought me a—"

Elvia didn't seem to be listening. She stopped square in front of me.

I looked at her, confused. Was she going to hand it to me? I saw a cup, but I didn't really see any snack. I reached out to take the drink...

"Yah!" Elvia shouted at the top of her lungs, and dumped the stuff in the cup all over me.

"Eeyikes! What in the heck...?!" I exclaimed. The contents of the cup now covered me from head to toe, and they had a familiar, slightly burnt smell.

"*O-O-Oh no, and after Cerise was so nice as to give me some of her tail, I went and spilled Shinichi-sama's snack all over him!! Oopsie!*"

"You sound like you're reading from a script! Wait—you used Cerise's tail this time?!" Were lizardman-tail stamina drinks just normal in this world?! "And you spilled it on me on purpose, didn't you?!" Late-night snack, my foot! It was pretty obvious this was deliberate! But why would she do such a thing?! "Ugh, I'm soaked in it..."

Just like before, the gooey liquid was stuck in my hair, and it wasn't fun. With apologies to Cerise, I would have to go wash this right out...

"Huh—?!"

I had a bad feeling. Almost a premonition.

"You sure are! You're all dirty, right?! Let's get you in the bath!"

Before I could object, Elvia had a grip on my arm and was dragging me out of my chair. I fell right on the ground, but she kept pulling.

"Wait—Elvia?!"

As we sped down the hallway, I twisted to get a look at her. Her cheeks were bright red, and her eyes seemed a little out of focus—and was it just me, or was her breathing harsh? Like she was really excited... about... something...

Uh-oh. Was *that* what was happening?!

I remembered something she had said just after Amatena and the others had left.

"I can't believe you got in the bath with Big Sis Ama, but not with me! It's so unfair! That's cheating! You're the worst!"

"I told you, that was an accident!" I flailed and struggled, but a contest between a former shut-in and a werewolf in the grip of the moon was no contest at all. Elvia was making a beeline for the bath... "Elvia, wait—Elvia?!"

"I'm not waiting another minute!" she snorted.

Was she about to eat me up?! I mean, in more ways than one?! And when Myusel and the others found out what had happened—ahhh?! Not only was I about to pop my duck, but I might as well have been on public display! I would be traumatized for life!

"Sh—Shinichi-sama!" Myusel, frozen by Elvia's sudden appearance, finally came to her senses, poking her head out of the room after us. But she didn't have any better idea what to do than I did, and could only watch us go.

My desperate scream rent the late-night silence of our mansion:

"Heeeeeeellllllllpppp meeeeeeeee!!"

□□□□□

To be continued...

Afterword

Hullo, light novelist Sakaki here, bringing you Volume 11 of *Outbreak Company: The Power of Moe*.

.....Oh, uh, believe me, my dear readers, I know. I know what you're thinking.

Didn't he say the next volume would be a short story collection in the last *volume?* And yet here we are, with a perfectly normal long-form story. That's, well, uh, yes, I did go back on my word (?). Yes.

Truth be told, I plotted out what I expected would be three short stories, but with two of them, when I started writing, I found I had almost as much material as a regular novel..... and, well, this is the result. I'm sorry. The fact that I've been a pro novelist for more than ten years now and still can't tell whether a plot will turn out to be a short story or a long one... Trust me, I'm embarrassed.

Of course, you do need more plot for a novel than for a short story, so I added a couple of extra twists while writing the draft of this volume. To say what they were would be a spoiler, so I'll leave it to your imagination.

All that being the case, I expect the next volume will consist of the second formerly short story. Let's just say it's a tale of someone who's never had a book cover to themselves before...

But what about that third short story? It's a very difficult idea to expand, so I don't foresee it becoming a third complete novel. I guess I'll need to think up a couple more short story ideas.

In any event, thanks to the support of my readers, it looks like *Outbreak Company* will get to continue a while longer. I've got a shock twist, a complete reversal, up my sleeve (in fact, this book lays some of the groundwork for it), so I hope you'll stick with me for a few more volumes.

Catch you next time!

Sakaki Ichiro 27 Aug 2014

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Outbreak Company: Volume 11
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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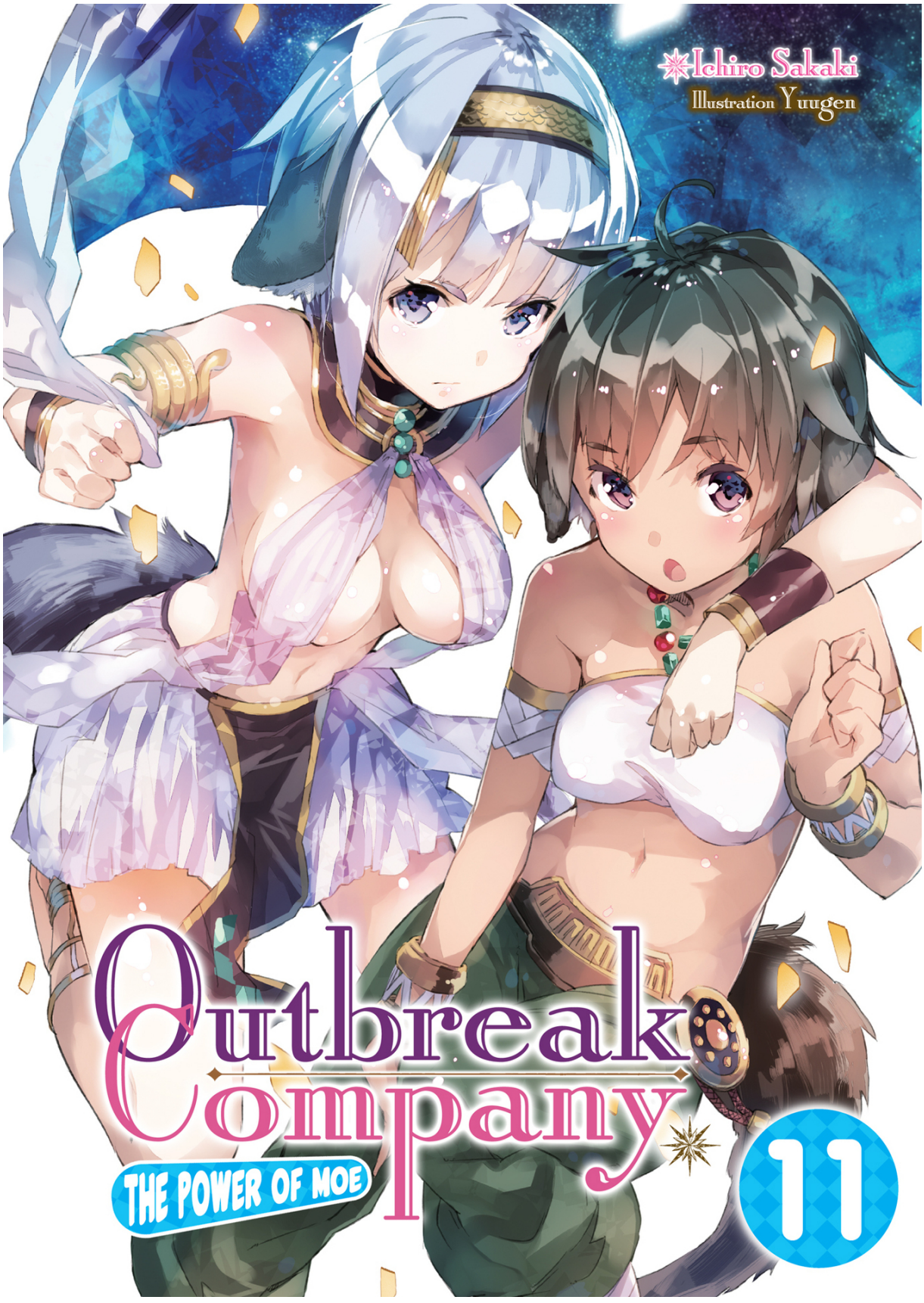
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